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NANCY.

A Novel.

BY

RHODA BROUGHTON,

AUTHOR OF "RED AS A ROSE IS SHE," "GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART," ETC., ETC.

"As thro' the land at eve we went,
And pluck'd the ripened ears,
We fell out, my wife and I,
O we fell out I know not why,
And kissed again with tears."

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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NANCY.

CHAPTER I.

A HEAVY foot along the passage, a hand upon the door, a hatted head looking in.

"Roger," says father, in that laboriously amiable voice in which he always addresses his son-in-law, "sorry to interrupt you, but could you come here for a minute?—will not keep you long."

"All right!" cries Sir Roger, promptly.

(How *can* he speak in that flippantly cheerful voice, with the prospect of seventeen days' sea before him?)

"Now, where did I put my hat, Nancy? did you happen to notice?"

"It is here," say I, picking it up from the window-seat, and handing it to him with lugubrious solemnity.

As he reaches the door, following father, he turns and nods to me with a half humorous smile.

"Cheer up," he says, "it shall not be a sailing-vessel."

He is gone, and I return to my former position, and my former occupation, only that now—the check of Sir Roger's presence being removed—I indulge in two or three good hearty groans. To think how the look of all things is changed since this morning.

As we came home through the fields singing, if any one had given me three wishes, I should have been puzzled what to ask—and *now!* All the good things I am going to lose march in gloomy

procession before my mind. *No House-warming!* It will have to be put off till we come back, and by the time that we come back, Bobby will almost certainly have been sent to some foreign station for three or four years. And who knows what may happen before he returns?. Perhaps—for I am in the mood when all adversities seem antecedently probable—he will *never* come back. Perhaps never again shall I be the willing victim of his buffets, never again shall I buffet him in return.

And the *Sea!!* It is all very fine for Sir Roger to take it so easily, to laugh and make unfeeling jokes at my expense! *He* does not lie on the flat of his back, surrounded by the horrid paraphernalia of sea-sickness. *He* walks up and down, with his hands in his pockets, smoking a cigar, and talking to the captain. *He* cares nothing for the heaving planks. The taste of

the salt air gives *him* an appetite. An *appetite!* Oh, prodigious! I must say I think he might have been a *little* more feeling, might have expressed himself a *little* more sympathetically.

By dint of thinking over Sir Roger's iniquities on this head, I gradually work myself up into such a state of righteous indignation and injury against him, that when, after a longish interval, the door again opens to re-admit him, I affect neither to see nor hear him, nor be in any way conscious of his presence. Through the chinks of my fingers, dolorously spread over my face, I see that he has sat down on the other side of the table, just opposite me, and that he is smiling in the same unmirthful gently sarcastic way, as he was when he left me.

"Nancy," he says, "I have been thinking what a pity it is that I have not a *yacht!* We might have taken our own time then,

and done it enjoyably—made quite a pleasure trip of it."

I drop my hands into my lap.

"People's ideas of pleasure differ," I say, with trite snappishness.

"Yes," he answers a little sadly, "no two people look at anything in *quite* the same way, do they?—not even husband and wife."

"I suppose not," say I, still thinking of the steward.

"Do you know," he says, leaning his arms and his crossed hands on the table between us, and steadfastly regarding me, "that I never saw you look miserable before, never? I did not even know that you *could!*"

"I am not *miserable*," I answer, rather ashamed of myself, "that is far too strong a word! Of course I am a little disappointed." Then I mumble off into an indistinctness, whence the nouns "House-

warming," "Bobby," "Gold Coast," crop out audibly.

"After all," he says, still regarding me, and speaking kindly, yet a little coldly too, "you need not look so woebegone. They say second thoughts are best, do not they? Well, I have been thinking second thoughts, and—I have altered my mind."

"You are going to stay at home?" cry I, at the top of my voice, jumping up in an ecstasy, and beginning to clap my hands.

"No," he says, gently, "not quite *that*, as I explained to you before, that is impossible; but—do not be downcast—something nearly as good. I am going to leave *you* at home!"

To leave me at home! My first feeling is one of irrepressible relief. No sea! no steward! no curtseying ship! no swaying waves after all! Then comes a quick and strong revulsion, shame, mortification, and pain.

"To—leave—me—at home!" I repeat slowly, hardly yet grasping the idea, "to—go—*without*—me!—by yourself?"

"By myself," he answers, gently. "You see it is no *new* thing to me. I have been by myself for forty-seven years."

A quick remorseful pain runs through my heart.

"But you are not by yourself any longer," I cry, eagerly. "Why do you talk as if you were? Do you count *me* for nothing?"

"For nothing," he answers, smiling quietly. "I am glad of an excuse to be rid of you for a bit—that is it!"

"But *is* that it?" cry I, excitedly, rising and running round to him. "If you are sure of that—if you will *swear* it to me—I will not say another word. I will hold my tongue, and try to bear as well as I can your having grown tired of me so soon—but—" speaking more slowly, and hesitating, "if—if—it is that you fancied—you

thought—you imagined—that I did not *want* to come with you——"

"My dear," he says, laughing not at all bitterly, but with a genuine amusement, "I should have been even less bright than I am, if I had not gathered that much."

I sink down on a chair, and cover my face with my hands. My *attitude* is the same as it was ten minutes ago, but oh! how different are my feelings! What bitter repentance, what acute self-contempt invade my soul. As I so sit, I feel an arm round my waist.

"Nancy," says Sir Roger, "it was ill-naturedly said; do not fret about it; you were not in the least to blame. I should not like you half so much—should not think nearly so well of you, if you had been willing to give up all your own people, to throw them lightly over, all of a sudden, for a comparative stranger, treble your age, too"—(with a sigh)—"like me."

He generously ignores the selfish fear of sea-sickness, of *personal* suffering, which had occupied the fore front of my mind.

"It will be much, *much* better—a far more sensible plan for both of us," he continues, cheerfully. "Where would be the use of exposing you to the discomfort and misery of what you hate most on earth for no possible profit? I shall not be long away, shall be back almost before you realise that I am gone, and meanwhile I should be far happier thinking of you merry and enjoying yourself with your brothers and sisters at Tempest, than I should be seeing you bored and suffering, with no one but me to amuse you—you know, dear—" (smiling pensively), "do not be angry with me, it was no fault of yours; but you *did* grow rather tired of me at Dresden."

"I did not! I did not!" cry I, bursting into a passion of tears, and asseverating all the more violently because I feel, with

a sting of remorse, that there is a tiny grain of truth—not so large a one as he thinks, but still a *grain* in his accusations. "It seemed rather *quiet* at first—I had always been used to such a noisy house, and I missed the boys' chatter a little, perhaps; but *indeed*, INDEED that was all!"

"Was it? I daresay! I daresay!" he says, soothingly.

"You shall *not* leave me behind," say I, still weeping with stormy bitterness. "I *will not* be left behind! What business have you to go without me? Am I to be only a fair-weather wife to you? to go shares in all your pleasant things, and then, —when anything hard or disagreeable comes—to be left out. I tell you" (looking up at him with streaming eyes) "that I *will not!* I WILL NOT!"

"My darling!" he says, looking most thoroughly concerned—I do not fancy that crying women have formed a large part of

his life experience,—"you misunderstand me! I will own to you that five minutes ago I did you an injustice; but *now* I know, I am thoroughly convinced, that you would follow me without a murmur or a sulky look to the world's end—and" (laughing) "be frightfully sea-sick all the way; but" (kindly patting my heaving shoulder) "do you think that I want to be hampered with a little invalid? and supposing that I took you with me, whom should I have to look after things at Tempest, and keep them straight for me against I come home?"

"I know what it is," I cry, passionately clinging round his neck, "you think I do not like you! I *see* it! twenty times a day, in a hundred things that you do and leave undone! but indeed, *indeed*, you never were more mistaken in all your life! I will own to you that I did not care *very* much about you at first. I thought you good and kind and excellent, but I was not *fond* of you; but

now—every day, every hour that I live, I like you better! Ask Barbara, ask the boys if I do not! I like you ten thousand times better than I did the day I married you!"

"*Like* me!" he repeats a little dreamily, looking with a strong and bitter yearning into my eyes; then seeing that I am going to asseverate, "for God's sake, child," he says, hastily, "do not tell me that you *love* me, for I know it is not true! you can no more help it than I can help caring for you in the idiotic mad way that I do! Perhaps on some blessed far-off day you may be able to say so, and I to believe it, but not now!—*not now!*"

CHAPTER II.

WITH feet as heavy and slowly dragging as those of some unwieldy old person, with drooped figure, and stained and swollen face, I enter the school-room an hour later to tell my ill news.

"Enter a young mourner!" says Algy, facetiously, in unkind allusion to the gloom of my appearance, which is perhaps heightened by the black silk gown I wear.

"What *is* up?" cries Bobby, advancing towards me with an overpowering curiosity, not unmixed with admiration, legible on his burnt face; "what *has* summoned those

glorious sunset tints into your eyes and nose?"

"Which of Turner's pictures," says Algy, putting up his hand in the shape of a spy-glass to one eye, and critically regarding me through it, "is she so like in colouring? the 'Founding of Carthage' or 'The Fighting Temeraire?'"

"Shame! shame!" cries Bobby, in a mock hortatory tone, trying to swell himself out to the shape and bulk of our fat rector, and to speak in his wheezy tone, "that a young woman so richly dowered with the good things of this life; a young woman with a husband and a deer-park in possession, and a House-warming in prospect——"

"But I have not," interrupt I, speaking for the first time, and with a snuffliness of tone, engendered by much crying.

"Have not? have not *what?*"

"Have not a House-warming in prospect," reply I, with distinct malignity. A

moment's silence. My bomb-shell has worked quite as much havoc as I expected.

"But where has it gone to since this morning?" asks Algy, looking rather blank.

"What do you mean?" cries Tou Tou, shrilly; "it was only last night that you were asking me for the Brat's address that you might invite him."

"And tell him to bring a judiciously selected assortment of undergraduate friends with him," supplements Bobby loudly.

"Yes," say I, sighing, "I know I did; but last night was last night."

"That throws a great deal of light on the matter, does it not?" says Algy, ironically.

"Nancy!" cries Bobby, seizing both my hands, and looking me in the face with an air of irritated determination, "if you do not *this moment* stop sighing like a windmill and tell us what is up, I will go to Sir Roger, hanged if I will not, and ask him

what he means by making you cry yourself to a *jelly!*"

At this bold metaphor applied to my own appearance, the tears begin again to start into my eyes.

"Do not!" cry I, eagerly, catching at his wrists in detention, "it was not his fault! he could not help it; but" (mopping first one eye and then the other, and finishing by a dolorous blast on my nose) "but I am *so* disappointed, everything is *so* changed, and I know I shall miss him *so* much!" I end with a break in my voice, and a long whimper.

"*Miss him!* miss whom?"

"The Ge-General!" reply I, indistinctly, from the recesses of a drenched pocket-handkerchief.

"But what is going to happen to him? where is he going to? I wish that you would be a little more intelligible," cry they all impatiently.

"He is going to the West Indies, to Antigua," reply I, lifting my face and speaking with a slow dejection.

"*To Antigua!*" cries Algy; "but what in the world is going to take him there?"

"Perhaps," says Bobby, in a loud aside to Tou Tou, "perhaps he has got another wife out there—a *black* one—and he thinks it is *her* turn now!"

Barbara says, "Hush!" and Tou Tou is beginning to embark on a long argument to prove that a man *cannot* have more than one wife at a time, when she is summarily *hustled* into silence, for I speak again.

"He has some property in the West Indies—I knew he had before—" (with a passing flash of pride in my superior information)—"I dare say you did not—and he has to go out there to look after it."

"*By himself?*"

"By himself, worse luck!" reply I, despondently, re-interring my countenance in my pocket-handkerchief.

"And you decline to accompany him? Well, I think you are about right!" says Algy, rising, lounging over to the empty hearth, and looking at his face with a glance of serious fondness in the glass that hangs above the mantel-shelf.

"I do nothing of the kind!" cry I, indignantly, "I have not the chance! he will not take me!"

I am not looking at him, nor, indeed, in his direction at all; but I am aware that Bobby is giving Tou Tou a private and severe nudge, which means "Attend! here is confirmation of my theory for you!" and that the idea of the hypothetical black lady is again traversing his ingenuous mind.

"I hope he will bring us some Jamaica ginger," he says, presently. "I wish you

would mention it, Nancy! the suggestion would come best from *you*, would not it?"

"And you are to be left *alone* at Tempest? Is that the plan?" asks Algy, turning his eyes from his own face, and fixing them on the less interesting object of mine.

It may be my imagination, but I cannot help fancying that there is a tone of slight and repressed exultation in his voice; and also that a look of hope and bright expectation is passing from one to another of the faces round me. All but Barbara's! Barbara always understands.

"*All alone?*" cries Tou Tou, opening her ugly little eyes to their widest stretch. "Nobody but the servants in the house with you? Will not you be very much afraid of *ghosts?*"

"She need never be alone, unless she chooses," says Bobby, winking with dextrous slightness at the others; "there is

the beauty of having three kind little brothers!"

"The moment you feel *at all* lonely," says Algy, emphasizing his remarks by benevolent but emphatic strokes with his flat hand on my shoulder, "*send for us!* one of us is sure to be handy! If it will be any comfort to Sir Roger, I shall be most happy to promise him that I will keep *all* his horses in exercise next winter!"

"I am sorrier than I was before," says Bobby, reflectively, "that the heavy rains have drowned so many of the young birds."

"Oh, Nancy!" cries Tou Tou, ecstatically clasping her hands, "*have* a Christmas tree!"

"And a dance after it!" adds Bobby, beginning to whistle a waltz tune.

"And Sir Roger's not being at home will be a good excuse for not asking

father," cries Algy, catching the prevailing excitement.

"I will not have *one* of you!" cry I, rising, with a face pale, as I feel, with anger—with flashing eyes and a trembling voice, "not *one* of you shall enter *his* doors, except Barbara!—I *hate* you *all!*—you are all g—g—*glad* that he is going, and I—I never was so sorry for anything in my life before!"

I end in a passion of tears. There is a silence of consternation on the late so jubilant assembly.

"'Times is changed,' says the dog's-meat man,"

remarks Bobby, presently, veiling his discomfiture in vulgarity, and launching into uncouth and low-lived rhyme;

"'Lights is riz,' says the dog's-meat man!"

CHAPTER III.

HOWEVER, not all the hot tears in the world — not all the swelled noses and boiled-gooseberry eyes avail to alter the case. Not even all my righteous wrath against the boys' profits—and I do keep Bobby at arms' length for a day and a half. No one who does not know Bobby understands how difficult such a course of proceeding is; for he is one of those people who ignore the finer shades of displeasure. The more delicately dignified and civilly frosty one is to him, the more grossly familiar and hopelessly, obtusely friendly is

he. I have made several more efforts to change Sir Roger's decision, but in vain. He makes the case more difficult by laying his refusal chiefly on his own convenience; dilating on the much greater speed and ease with which he will be able to transact his business, if *alone*, than if weighted by a woman, and a woman's paraphernalia, and also on the desirability of having in me a locum tenens for himself at Tempest. But, in my soul, I know that both these are hollow pretences to lighten the weight on my conscience.

"But," say I, with discontented demurring, "you have been away often before! how did Tempest get on *then*?"

He laughs.

"Very middling, indeed! last time I was away the servants gave a ball in the new ball-room—so my friends told me afterwards, and the time before, the butler took the housekeeper a driving-tour in my

T.-cart. I should not have minded *that* much—but I suppose he was not a very good whip, and so he threw down one of my best horses, and broke his knees!"

"Well, they *shall not* give a ball!" say I, resolutely, "but"—(in a tone of melancholy helplessness)—"they may throw down *all* the horses, for anything *I* can do to prevent them! A horse's knees would have to be *very much broken*, before I should perceive that they were!"

"You must get Algy to help you," he says, kindly. "It is an ill wind that blows nobody good, is not it? Poor boy!"—(laughing)—"you must not expect *him* to be very keen about my speedy return."

As he speaks, an arrow of animosity towards Algy shoots through my heart.

We are at Tempest—Sir Roger and I. It has been his wish to establish me there

before his departure; and now it is the gray of the evening before his setting off, and we are strolling through the still park. Vick is racing, with idiotic ardour, through the tall green bracken, after the mottled deer, yelping with shrill insanity, and vainly imagining that she is going to overtake them. The gray rabbits are scuttling across the grass rides in the pale light: as I see them popping in and out of their holes, I cannot help thinking of Bobby. Apparently, Sir Roger also is reminded of him.

"Nancy," he says, looking down at me with a smile of recollected entertainment, "have you forgiven Bobby yet for leaving you sitting on the wall? I remember, in the first blaze of your indignation, you vowed that never should he fire a gun in your preserves!—do you still stick to it, or have you forgiven him?"

"*That* I have not!" cry I, heartily.

"None of them shall shoot anything! Why should they? Everything shall be kept for you against you come back!"

He raises his eyebrows a little.

"Rabbits and all?"

"Rabbits and all!" reply I, firmly.

"And what will the farmers say?" asks Sir Roger, smiling.

I have not considered this aspect of the question, so remain silent. We walk on without speaking for some moments. The deer, in lofty pity for Vick, have stopped to allow her to get nearer to them. With their fine noses in the air, and their proud necks compassionately turned towards her, they are waiting, while she pushes, panting and shrieking, through the stout fern-stems; then, leap cruelly away in airy bounds.

"If I am not back by Christmas,"—— says Sir Roger presently.

"By *Christmas!*" interrupt I, aghast;

"one, two, three, four, *five* months—but you *must!*—you MUST!" clasping both hands on his arm.

"I hope I shall, certainly," replies he; "but one never knows what may happen! If I am *not*——"

"But you *must*," repeat I urgently, and apparently resolved that he shall never reach the end of his sentence; "if you are not—I warn you—you may not like it—I dare say you will not—but—I shall come to look for you!"

"In a *sailing-vessel*, like the Governor-General's wife?" asks he with a smile.

* * * * *

And now he is gone! gone in the first freshness of the morning! This year, I seem fated to witness the childhood of many summer days. The carriage that bears him away is lost to sight—dwindled away to nothing among the park trees. Five minutes ago, my arms were clinging

with a tightness of clasp that a bear might have admired round his neck. I was too choked with tears to say much, and kept repeating with the persistence of a guinea-fowl, but without its distinctness, "Come back! come back!"

"Good-bye, my Nancy!" he says, holding me a little from him, that he may the better consider my face, "be quite—*quite* happy, while I am away—*indeed* that will be the way to please me best, and be a little glad to see me when I come back!"

And now he is gone; and I am left standing at the hall-door; with level hand shading my eyes from the red sun—with a smeared face—with the butler and two footmen respectfully regarding my affliction—(*they* do not like to disappear, till they have shut the door—*I* do not like to ask them to retire, and I do not like to lose the last glimpse) so there I remain—nineteen—a grass widow, and—ALONE! I shall

not, however, be alone for long; for this evening Barbara is coming. Algy is to bring her, and to stay a few days on his way to Aldershot. All day long, I wander with restless aimlessness about the house, my big house—so empty, so orderly in its stateliness—so frightfully silent! Ah! the doll's house whose whole front came out at once was a better companion—much more friendly, and not half so oppressive. In almost every room, I cry profusely—disagreeable tears of shame and remorse and grief—only, oh friends! I will tell you *now*, what I would not tell myself then, that the grief, though true, was not so great as either of the other feelings. I lunch in the great dining-room, with tall full length Tempests eyeing me with constant placidity from the walls; with the butler and footman still trying respectfully to ignore my swelled nose and bunged-up eyes.

As evening draws on—evening that is to bring some voices, some sound of steps to me and my great dumb house—I revive a little. If it were Bobby that were coming, my mind would be weighted by the thought of the repression his spirits would need, but Algy's mirth is several shades less violent, and Barbara is never jarringly joyful. So I change my dress, bathe my face, make my maid re-twist my hair, and prepare to be chastenedly and moderately glad to see them.

At least there will be some one to occupy two more of these numberless chairs; two more for the stolid family portraits to eye; two voices, nay *three*, for *I* shall speak then, to drown the sounding silence.

It is time that they should be here. The carriage went to the station more than an hour ago. I sit down in a window-seat that commands the park, and look along

the drive by which the General went this morning.

Dear Roger! I will practise calling him "Roger" when I am by myself, and then perhaps I may be able to address him by it, when he comes home. I will say, "How are you, Roger?"

I have fallen into a pleasant reverie, with my head leant against the curtain, in which I see myself giving glib utterance to this formula, as I stand in a blue gown—Roger likes me in blue—and a blue cap—I look older in a cap—while he precipitates himself madly——

My reverie breaks off. Some one has entered, and is standing by me. It is a footman, with a telegram on a salver. Albeit I know the trivial causes for which people employ the telegraph wires now-a-days, I never can get over my primal deadly fear of those yellow envelopes, that seem emblems and messengers of battle,

murder and sudden death. As I tear it open, a hundred horrible impossible possibilities flash across my brain. Algy and Barbara have both been killed in a railway accident, and have telegraphed to tell me so; the same fate has happened to Roger, and he has adopted the same course.

"*Algernon Grey to Lady Tempest.*

"Cannot come: not allowed: *He* has turned nasty."

The paper drops into my lap, as I draw a long breath of mingled relief and disappointment. A whole long evening—long night of this solitude before me! perhaps much more, for they do not even say that they will come to-morrow! I *must* utter my disappointment to somebody, even if it is only the footman.

"They are not coming!" say I, plaintively; then, recollecting and explaining myself, "I mean, they need not send in

dinner! I will not have any!" I *cannot* stand another repast—three times longer than the last too—for one *can* abridge luncheon, seated in lorn dignity between the staring dead on the walls, and the obsequious living.

As soon as the man is fairly out of the room, I cry again. Yes, though my hair is re-adjusted, though I spent more than a quarter of an hour in bathing my eyes, and restoring some semblance of white to their lids, though I had resolved—and without much difficulty, too, hitherto—to be dry-eyed for the rest of the evening. What does it matter what colour my eyelids are? what size my nose is? or how be-blubbered my cheeks? Not a soul will see them, except my maid, and I am naturally indifferent as to the effect I produce upon her. I look at the clock on the mantelpiece. It has stopped—ornamental clocks mostly do—but even this trivial circum-

stance adds to my affliction. I instantly take out my pocket-handkerchief, and begin to cry again. Then I look at my watch; a quarter-past seven only—and my watch always gains! Two hours and three quarters before I can, with the smallest semblance of decency, go to bed. Meanwhile I am hungry. Though my husband has deserted me, though my brother and sister have failed me, my appetite has done neither.

Faithful friend! never yet was it known to quit me, and here it is! I decide to have *tea* in my own boudoir. Tea is informal and one need not be waited on at it. When it comes, I try to dawdle over it as much as possible, to sip my tea with laboured slowness, and bite each mouthful with conscientious care. When I have finished, I think with satisfaction that I cannot have occupied less than half an hour. Again I consult my watch. Exactly

twelve minutes. It is now five minutes to eight; two hours and five minutes more! I sigh loudly, and putting on my hat stroll out into the wide and silent garden. It is as yet unfamiliar to me. I do not know where half the walks lead. I have no favourite haunts, no chosen spot of solitude and greenery, where old and pleasant thoughts meet me. Many such have I at home, but none here. I wander objectlessly, pleasurelessly about with Vick—apparently sharing my depression—trotting subduedly, with tail half-mast high, at my heels, and at length sit down on a bench under a mulberry-tree. The scentless flame of the geraniums and calceolarias fills, without satisfying, my eyes; the gnats' officious hum offends my ears; and thoughts in comparison of which the calceolarias are sweet and the gnats melodious, occupy my mind.

Sir Roger will most likely be drowned

on his voyage out. Bobby will almost certainly be sent to Hong Kong, and, as a natural consequence, die of a putrid fever. Algy has just entered the army: there can be no two opinions as to our going to war immediately with either Russia or America. Algy will probably be among the first to fall, and will die, grasping his colours, and shouting "Victory!" or "Westminster Abbey!" or perhaps both.

I have not yet decided what he shall be shouting, when the current of my thoughts is turned by seeing some one—thank Heaven, not a footman, this time—advancing across the sward towards me. Surely I know the nonchalant lounge of that walk—the lazy self-consciousness of that gait, though when last I saw it, it was not on dewy English turf, but on the baking flags of a foreign town. It is Mr. Musgrave. Until this moment I have ungratefully forgotten his existence, and all

the interesting facts he told me connected with his existence—how his lodge faces ours—how he has no father nor mother and lives by himself at an Abbey. Alas in this latter particular, can I not feel for him? Am *I* not living by myself at a *Hall?*

Vick recognises him at about the same moment as I do. Having first sprung at him with that volubility of small but hostile *yaps*, with which she strikes terror into the hearts of tramps, she has now—having *smelt* him to be not only respectable, but an acquaintance—changed her behaviour to a little servile whine and a series of high jumps at his hand.

"It is you, is it?" cry I, springing up and running to meet him with an elate sensation of company and sociability; "I had quite forgotten that you lived near here. I'm *so* glad!"

At my happy remark as to having been

hitherto oblivious of his existence, his face falls in the old lowering way I remember so well, and that brings back to me so forcibly the Prager Strasse, the Zwinger, the even sunshine that favoured my honeymoon; but at the heartily expressed joy at seeing him with which I conclude he cheers up again. If he had known that I was in so reduced a state that I should have enjoyed a colloquy with a chimney-sweep, and not despised exchanging opinions with a dustman, he would not have thought my admission worth much.

"So you have come at last," he says, holding my hand, and looking at me with those long dark eyes that I would swear were black had not a conscientious and thorough daylight scrutiny of them assured me long ago that they were hazel.

"Yes," say I, cheerfully; "I told you you would catch sight of us, sooner or later, if you waited long enough."

"And your tenants never dragged you in, after all?"

"No," say I; "we did not give them the chance. But how do *you* know? Were you peeping out of your lodge? If I had remembered that you lived there, I would have been on the look-out for you."

"You had, of course, entirely forgotten so insignificant a fact?" he says, with a tone of pique.

That huffy tone! how well I recollect it! I feel quite fondly towards it; it reminds me so strongly of the Linkesches Bad, of the brisk band, and of Roger smoking and smiling at me with his gray eyes across our Maitrank.

"Yes," I say, contritely, "I am ashamed to say I had—*quite;* but you see I have had a good many things to think of lately."

At this point it strikes me, that he must have forgotten that he has my hand,

so I quietly, and without offence, resume it.

"And you are *alone*—Sir Roger has left you quite *alone* here?"

"Yes," say I, lachrymosely; "is not it *dreadful?* I never was so miserable in my life; I do not think I *ever* was by myself for a *whole* night before, and"—(lowering my voice to a nervous whisper)—"they tell me there is a ghost somewhere about. Did you ever hear of it?—and the furniture gives *such* cracks!"

"And—he has gone *by himself?*" he continues, still harping on the same string, as if unable to leave it.

"Yes," reply I, laconically, hanging my head, for this is a topic on which I feel always guilty, and never diffuse.

"H'm!" he says, ruminatingly, and as if addressing the remark more to himself than to me.

"I suppose it *is* difficult to get out of

old habits, and into new ones all of a sudden."

"I do not know what you mean by old habits and new habits," cry I, angrily; "if you think he did not want me to go with him, you are very much mistaken; he would have much rather that I had."

"But *you*," looking at me penetratingly, and speaking with a sort of alacrity, "you did not see it? I remember of old" (with a smile) "your abhorrence of the sea."

"You are wrong again," say I, reddening, and still speaking with some heat, "I *wished* to go—I begged him to take me. However sick I had been, I should have liked it better than being left moping here, without a soul to speak to!"

Silence for a moment. Then he speaks with a rather sarcastic smile.

"I confess myself puzzled; if *you* were dying to go, and *he* were dying to take you,

how comes it that you are sitting at the present moment on this bench?"

I can give no satisfactory answer to this query, so take refuge in a snub.

"I see," say I, tartly, "that you have still your old trick of asking questions. I wish that you would try to get the better of it: it is very disadvantageous to you, and very trying to other people!"

He takes this severe set-down in silence.

The trees that surround the garden are slowly darkening. The shadows that intervene between the round masses of the sycamore leaves deepen, deepen. A bat flitters dumbly by. Vick, to whose faith all things seem possible, runs sharply barking and racing after it. We both laugh at the fruitlessness of her undertaking, and the joint merriment restores suavity to me, and assurance to him.

"And are you to stay here by yourself *all* the time he is away—*all*?"

"God forbid!" reply I, with devout force.

"Not? well then—I am really afraid this is a question again, but I cannot help it. If you will not volunteer information, I must ask for it—who is to be your companion?"

"I suppose they will take turns," say I, relapsing into dejection, as I think of the precarious nature of the society on which I depend; "sometimes one, sometimes another, whichever can get away best—they will take turns."

"And who is to have the *first* turn?" he asks, leaning back in the corner of the seat, so as to have a fuller view of my lamentable profile; "when is the first instalment of consolatory relatives to arrive?"

"Algy and Barbara *were* to have come to-day," reply I, feeling a covert resentment against something of faintly *gibing* in his tone, but being conscious that it is not perceptible enough to justify another snub,

even if I had one ready, which I have not.

"And they did not?"

"Now is not that a silly question?" cry I, tartly, venting the crossness born of my desolation on the only person within reach; "if they *had*, should I be sitting moping here with nobody but Vick to talk to?"

"You forget *me!* may not I run in couples even with a *dog?*" he asks, with a little bitter laugh.

"I did not forget you," reply I, coolly; "but you do not affect the question one way or another — you will be gone directly and—when you are——"

"Thank you for the hint," he cries, springing up, picking up his little stick off the grass, and flushing.

"You are not going?" cry I, eagerly, laying my hand on his coat-sleeve, "do not! why should you? there is no hurry. Let me have some one to help

me to keep the ghosts at bay as long as I can!" then, with a dim consciousness of having said something rather *odd*, I add, reddening, "I shall be going in directly, and you may go then."

He reseats himself. A tiny air is ruffling the flower-beds, giving a separate soft good-night to each bloom.

"And what happened to Algy and Barbara?" he says presently.

"Happened? Nothing!" I answer absently.

"Very brutal of Algy and Barbara then!" he says, more in the way of a reflection than a remark.

"Very brutal of *father*, you should say!" reply I, roused by the thought of my parent to a fresh attack of active and lively resentment.

"I have no doubt I should if I knew him."

"He would not let them come!" say I,

explanatorily, "for what reason? for *none* —he never has any reasons, or if he has, he does not give them. I sometimes think" (laughing maliciously) "that *you* will not be unlike him, when you grow old and gouty."

"Thank you."

"*You* have no father, have you?" continue I presently; "no, I remember your telling me so at the Linkesches Bad. Well," (laughing again, with a certain grim humour), I would not fret about it *too* much, if I were you—it is a relationship that has its disadvantages."

He laughs a little dryly.

"On whatever other heads I may quarrel with Providence, at least no one can accuse me of ever murmuring at its decrees in this respect."

We have risen. The darkness creeps on apace, warmly, without damp or chillness; but still, on it comes! I have to face the prospect of my great and gloomy house all

through the lagging hours of the long black night!

"They will come to-morrow, *certainly*, I suppose?" (interrogatively).

"Not *certainly*, at all!" reply I, with an energetic despondence in my voice; "quite the contrary! most likely not! most likely not the day after either, nor the day after that——"

"And if they do not" (with an accent of sincere compassion), "what will you do?"

"What I have done to-day, I suppose," I answer, dejectedly; "cry till my cheeks are *sore!* You may not believe me" (passing my bare fingers lightly over them as I speak), "but they feel quite *raw*. I wonder" (with a little dismal laugh) "why tears were made *salt!*—they would not blister one half so much if they were fresh water."

He has drawn a pace or two nearer to me. In this light one has to look closely

at any object that one wishes specially and narrowly to observe; and I myself have pointed out the peculiarities of my countenance to him, so I cannot complain if he scrutinizes me with a lengthy attention.

"It is going to be such a *dark* night!" I say, with a slight shiver; "and if the wind gets up, I know that I shall lie awake all night, thinking that the Gen—that Roger is drowned! Do not you think" (looking round apprehensively) "that it is rising already? See how those boughs are waving!"

"Not an atom!" reassuringly.

We both look for an instant at the silent flower-beds, at the sombre bulk of the house.

"If they do not come to-morrow——" begins Frank.

"But they *will!*" cry I, petulantly; "they *must!* I cannot do without them! I believe some people do not *mind* being

alone—not even in the evenings, when the furniture cracks and the door-handles rattle. I dare say *you* do not; but I hate my own company; I have never been used to it. I have always been used to a great deal of noise,—*too* much, I have sometimes thought, but I am sure that I never shall think so again!"

"Well, but if they do not——"

"You have said that three times," I cry, irritably. "You seem to take a pleasure in saying it. If they do not—well, what?"

"I will not say what I was going to say," he answers, shortly. "I shall only get my nose bitten off if I do."

"Very well, do not!" reply I with equal suavity.

We walk in silence towards the house, the wet grass is making my long gown drenched and flabby. We have reached the garden door whence I issued, and by which I shall return.

"You must go now, I suppose," say I, reluctantly. "*You* will be by yourself too, will not you? Tell me" (speaking with lowered confidential tone), "do *your* chairs and tables ever make odd noises?"

"Awful!" he answers, laughing. "I can hardly hear myself speak for them."

I laugh too.

"You might as well tell me before you go what the remark that I quenched was? One always longs to hear the things that people are *going* to say, and do not! Have no fear! your nose is quite safe!"

"It is nothing much," he answers, with self-conscious stiffness, looking down and poking about the little dark pebbles with his cane; "nothing that you would care about."

"*Care about!*" echo I, leaning my back against the dusk house wall, and staring up at the sombre purple of the sky. "Well, no! I dare say not! What *should* I care

to hear now? I am sure I should be puzzled to say! But, as I have been so near it, I may as well be told."

"As you will!" he answers, with an air of affected carelessness. "It is only that, if they *do not* come to-morrow——"

"*Fourth time!*" interject I, counting on my fingers and smiling.

"If you *wish*—if you *like*—if it would be any comfort to you—I shall be happy—I mean I shall be very glad to come up again about the same time to-morrow evening."

"*Will* you?" (eagerly, with a great accession of exhilaration in my voice). "Are you serious? I shall be so much obliged if you will, but——"

"It is *impossible* that any one can say anything," he interrupts, hastily. "There *could* be no harm in it!"

"*Harm!*" repeat I, laughing. "Well,

hardly! I cannot fancy a more innocent amusement."

Though my speech is in agreement with his own, the coincidence does not seem to gratify him.

"What did you mean, then?" he says, sharply. "You said 'but'——"

"Did I?" answer I, again throwing back my head, and looking upwards, as if trying to trace my lost preposition among the clouds; "but—*but*—where could I have put a '*but*'?—oh, I know! *but* you will most likely forget! Do not!" I continue, bringing down my eyes again, and speaking in a coaxing tone. "If you do, it will be play to you, but *death* to me; the thought of it will keep me up all the day!"

"Will it?" in a tone of elated eagerness. "You are not *gibing*, I suppose? it does not sound like your gibing voice!"

"Not it!" reply I, gloomily. "My gibing voice is packed away at the bottom

of my imperial. I do not think it has been out since we left Dresden. Well, good-night! What do you want to shake hands *again* for? We have done that *twice* already. You are like the man who, the moment he had finished reading prayers to his family, began them all over again. *Mind* you do not forget! and" (laughing) "if you cannot come yourself, *send some one else! any one* will do—I am not particular, but I *must* have *some one* to speak to!"

Almost before my speech is finished, Frank is out of sight. With such rapid suddenness has he disappeared round the house corner. I stand for a moment, marvelling a little at his hurry. Five minutes ago he seemed willing enough to dawdle on till midnight. Then I go in, and forget his existence.

CHAPTER IV.

I SUPPOSE that in all this world, during all its ages, there never was a case of a person being *always* in an ill-humour. I believe that even Xantippe had her lucid intervals of amiability, during which she fondled her Socrates. At all events, father has. On the day after my disappointment, one such interval occurs. He relents, allows Algy and Barbara to have the carriage, and sends them off to Tempest.

Either Mr. Musgrave becomes aware of this fact, or, as I had anticipated, he forgets his promise, for he never appears, and I

do not see him again till Sunday. By Sunday my cheeks are no longer *raw;* the furniture has stopped cracking—seeing that no one paid any attention to it, it wisely left off—and the ghosts await a fitter opportunity to pounce.

I have heard from Sir Roger—a cheerful note, dated Southampton. If *he* is cheerful, I may surely allow myself to be so too. I therefore no longer compunctiously strangle any stray smiles that visit my countenance. I have taken several drives with Barbara in my new pony-carriage—it is a curious sensation being able to order it without being subject to father's veto—and we have skirted our own park, and have peeped through his close wooden palings at Mr. Musgrave's, have strained our eyes and stretched our necks to catch a glimpse of his old gray house, nestling low down among its elms. (Was there ever an Abbey that did not live in a hollow?) With bated

breath, lest the groom behind should overhear me, I have lightly sketched to Barbara the outline of an idea for establishing her in that weather-worn old pile—an idea which I think was born in my mind as long ago as the first evening that I saw its owner at the Linkesches Bad, and heard that he *had* an Abbey, and that it was over against my future home.

Barbara does not altogether deny the desirability of the arrangement; she is not, however, so sanguine as I as to its feasibility, and she positively declines to consent to enter actively into it until she has seen him. This will be on Sunday. To Sunday, therefore, I look forward with pious haste.

Well, it is Sunday now—the Sunday of my first appearance as a bride at Tempest church. A bride without her bridegroom! A pang of mortification and pain shoots through me, as this thought traverses my

soul. I look at myself dissatisfiedly in the glass. Alas! I am no credit to his taste. If, for this once, I could but look taller, personabler, *older!*

"They will all say that he has made a fool of himself," I say, half aloud.

It is a sultry day, without wind or freshness, and with a great deal of sun; but in spite of this, I put on a silk gown, rich and heavy, as looking more *married* than the cobweb muslins, in which I have hitherto met the summer heat. On my head I place a sedately feathered bonnet, which would not have misbecome mother. I meet Algy and Barbara in my boudoir. They are already dressed. I examine Barbara with critical care, and with a discontented eye, though to a stranger her appearance would seem likely to inspire any feeling rather than dissatisfaction, for she looks as clean and fair and chastely sweet as ever maiden did. Ben Jonson must

have known some one like her when he wrote :

"Have you seen but a bright lily grow
Before rude hands have touch'd it?
Have you mark'd but the fall of the snow
Before the soil hath smutch'd it?
Have you felt the wool of the beaver
Or swansdown ever?
Or have smell'd of the bud of the briar,
Or the nard in the fire?
Or have tasted the bag of the bee?
Oh so white, oh so soft, oh so sweet is she!"

But all the same, having a bonnet on, she is distinctly less like Palma Vecchio's St. Catherine, to which in my talk with Frank I compared her, than she was bare-headed this morning at breakfast. Who in the annals of history ever heard of a saint in a *bonnet?*

"I wish that people might be allowed to go to church without their bonnets these hot Sundays," I say, grumblingly. "*You* especially, Barbara."

She laughs.

"I should be very glad, but I am afraid the beadle would turn me out."

"For heaven's sake," says Algy, gravely, putting back his shoulders and throwing out his chest, as he draws on a pair of exact gray gloves, "do not let us make ourselves to stink in the nostrils of the inhabitants by any eccentricities of conduct, on this our first introduction to them. If we consulted our own comfort, there is no doubt that we should reduce our toilettes by a good many more articles than a bonnet —in fact—" (with an air of reflection), "I shudder to think *where* we should stop!"

We are in church now. I have run the gauntlet of the observation of all the parishioners, and have been unable to look calmly unaware of it; on the contrary, have grown consciously rosy red, and have walked over hastily between the open sittings. But now I have reached the shelter of our own seat, near the top of the church, with all the

gay bonnets behind me, and only the pulpit, the spread-eagle reading-desk, and the gaudy stained window in front. As soon as I am established—almost sooner, perhaps—I turn my eyes in search of Mr. Musgrave. I know perfectly where to look for him, as he drew a plan of Tempest church and the relative position of our sittings, with the point of his stick on the gravel in the gardens close to the Zwinger at Dresden, while we sat under the trees by the little pool, feeding the pert sparrows and the intimate cock chaffinch that resort thither. He is not there!

Barbara may be crowned with any abomination, in the way of a bonnet, that ever entered into the grotesque imagination of a milliner to conceive—coal-scuttle, cottage, spoon—for all that it matters. The organ strikes up, a file of chorister boys in dirty surplices—Tempest is a more pretentious church than ours—and a brace

of clergy enter. All through the Confession I gape about with vacant inattention—at the grimy whiteness of the choir; at the back of the organist's head; at the parson, a mealy-mouthed fledgling, who, with his finger on his place in the prayer to prevent his losing it, is taking a stealthy inventory of my charms.

Suddenly I hear the door, which has been for some time silent, creak again in opening. Footsteps sound along the aisle. I look up. Yes, it is he! walking as quickly and noiselessly as he can, and looking rather ashamed of himself, while patches of red, blue, and golden light, from the east window, dance on his Sunday coat and on the smooth darkness of his hair. I glance at Barbara, to give her notice of the approach of her destiny, but my glance is lost. Barbara's stooped head is hidden by her hands, and her pure thoughts are away with God. As a *pis-aller*, I look at Algy.

No absorption in prayer on *his* part baffles me. He is leaning his elbow on his knee, and wearily biting the top of his Prayer-book. He returns my look by another, which, though wordless, is eloquent. It says, in raised eyebrow and drooped mouth, "Is that all? I do not think much of him?"

The church is full and hot. The windows are open indeed, but only the infinitesimally small chink that church windows ever do open. The pew-opener sedulously closes the great door after every fresh entrance. I kneel simmering through the Litany. Never before did it seem so long! Never did the chanted "We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord!" appear so endlessly numerous.

Under cover of my arched hands, shading my eyes, I peep at one after another of the family groups. Most of them are behind me indeed, but there are still a

good many that I can get a view of sideways. Among these, the one that oftenest engages my notice is a small white woman, evidently a lady—and, at the moment I first catch sight of her, with closed eyes and drawn-in nostrils, inhaling smelling-salts, as if to her, too, church was up-hill work this morning—in a little seat by herself. At the other pews one glance a piece satisfies me, but, having looked at *her* once, I look again. I could not tell you *why* I do it. There is nothing very remarkable about her in the matter of either youth or beauty, and yet I look.

The service is ended at length, but eagerly as I long for the fresh air, we are . —whether to mark our own dignity, or to avoid further scrutiny on the part of our fellow-worshippers—almost the last to issue from the church. At the porch we find Mr. Musgrave waiting. A sort of *mauvaise honte* and a guilty conscience combine to

disable me from promptly introducing him to my people, and before I recover my presence of mind, Algy has walked on with Barbara, and I am left to follow with Frank.

He does not seem in one of his most sunshiny humours, but perhaps the long morning service, so trying, in its present arrangement of lengthy prayers, praises, and preaching, to a restless and irritable temper, is to blame for that.

"I suppose," he says, speaking rather stiffly, "that I must congratulate you on the arrival of the first detachment."

"First detachment of what?"

"Of your family. I understood you to say that there were to be *relays* of them during all Sir Roger's absence."

"It is to be hoped so, I am sure," I say, devoutly; "especially" (looking up at him with mock reproach) "considering the way in which my friends neglect me. You

never came, after all! No!" (seeing the utter unsmilingness of his expression, and speaking hastily), "I am not serious; I am only joking! No doubt you heard that they had come, and thought that you would be in the way. But, indeed, you would not. We had no secrets to talk; we should not have minded you a bit."

"I *did* hear that they had arrived," he answers, still speaking ungraciously, "but even if I had not, I should not have come!"

I look up in his face, and laugh.

"You *forgot?* Ah, I told you you would!"

"I did *not* forget."

Again I look up at him, this time in honest astonishment, awaiting the solution of his enigma.

"There is no particular use in making oneself *cheap*, is there?" he says, with a bitter little laugh. "What is the use of

going to a place where you are told that *anyone else* will do as well?"

A pause. I walk along in silent wonderment. So he actually was huffy again! We have left the churchyard. We are in the road, between the dusty quicks of the hedgerows. The carriages bowl past us, whirling clouds of dust down our throats. One is trotting by now, a Victoria and pair of grays, and in it, leaning restfully back, and holding up her parasol, is the lady I noticed in church. Musgrave knows her apparently. At least, he takes off his hat.

"Who is she?" I say, with a slightly aroused interest. "I was wondering in church. I suppose she is delicate, as she sat down through the psalms."

At the moment I address him, Mr. Musgrave is battling angrily with an angrier wasp, but no sooner has he heard my question than he ceases his warfare, and allows

it to buzz within half-an-inch of his nose, as he turns his hazel eyes, full of astonished inquiry, upon me.

"You *do not know?*"

"Not I," reply I lightly. "How should I? I know nobody in these parts."

"That is Mrs. Huntley."

"You do not say so!" reply I, ironically. "I am sure I am very glad to hear it, but I am not very much wiser than I was before."

"Is it possible," he says, looking rather nettled at my tone, and lowering his voice a little, as if anxious to confine the question to me alone—a needless precaution, as there is no one else within hearing—"that you have *never* heard of her?"

"Never!" reply I, in some surprise; "why should I?—has she ever done anything very remarkable?"

He laughs slightly, but disagreeably.

"Remarkable! well, no, I suppose not!"

The Victoria is quite out of sight now—quite out of sight the delicately poised head, the dove-coloured parasol.

"You are joking, of course," says Frank presently, turning towards me, and still speaking in that needlessly lowered key. "It is so long since I have seen you that I have got out of the habit of remembering that you never speak seriously; but, *of course*, you have heard—I mean Sir Roger has mentioned her to you!"

"He has not!" reply I, speaking sharply, and raising my voice a little. "Neither has he mentioned any of the other neighbours to me! He had not time." No rejoinder. "Most likely," continue I, speaking with quick heat, for something in his manner galls me, "he did not recollect her existence."

"Most likely."

He is looking down at the white dust

which is defiling his patent leather boots, and smiling slightly.

"How do you know—what reason have you for thinking that he was aware that there was such a person?" I ask, with injudicious eagerness.

"I have no reason—I think nothing," he answers, coldly, with an air of ostentatious reserve.

I walk on in a ruffled, jarred silence. Presently Frank speaks again.

"Are those two"—(slightly indicating by a faint nod the figures in front of us)—"the two you expected?—Are these—what are their names?—*Algy* and *Barbara?*"

"Yes," say I, smiling, with recovered equanimity; "Algy and Barbara." A little pause. "You can judge for yourself now," say I, laughing rather nervously, "whether I spoke truth—whether Barbara is as like the St. Catherine as I told you."

For a moment he does not answer. "Of course," I say, rather crestfallen, "the bonnet makes a difference; the likeness is much more striking when it is off."

"The St. Catherine!" he repeats with a puzzled air, "*what* St. Catherine? I am afraid you will think me very stupid, but I really am quite at sea."

"Do you mean to say," cry I, reddening with mortification, "that you forget—that you do not remember that St. Catherine of Palma Vecchio's in the Dresden Gallery that I always pointed out to you as having such a look of Barbara? Well, you *have* a short memory!"

"Have I?" he answers, dryly; "perhaps for *some* things; for *others*, I fancy that mine is a good deal longer than yours."

"It might easily be that," I answer, recovering from my temporary annoyance and laughing; "I suppose you mean for books and dates and things of that kind.

Well, you may easily beat me there. The Landing of William the Conqueror, and the Battle of Waterloo, were the only two dates I ever succeeded in mastering, and that was only after the struggle of years."

"Dates!" he says, impatiently, "pshaw! I was not thinking of *them!* I was thinking of Dresden!"

"Are you so sure that you could beat me there?" ask I, thoughtfully; "I do not know about that! I think I could stand a pretty stiff examination; but perhaps you are talking of the pictures and the names of the artists. Ah, yes! there you are right; with *me* they go in at one ear, and out at another. Only the other day I was racking my brain to think of the name of the man that painted the *other* Magdalen—not Guido's—I was telling Algy about it. Bah! what is it? I know it as well as my own."

His head is turned away from me. He does not appear to be attending.

"What is it?" I repeat; "have *you* forgotten too?"

"Battoni!" he answers, laconically, still keeping his face averted.

"*Battoni!* oh, yes! thanks—of course! so it is!—Algy"—(raising my voice a little)—"*Battoni!*"

"Well, what about him?" replies Algy, turning his head, but not showing much inclination to slacken his speed or to join Frank and me.

"The Magdalen man—you know—I mean the man that painted the Magdalen, and whose name I could not recollect last night, Algy. Barbara! how fast you are walking!"—(speaking rather reproachfully)—"stop a moment! I want to introduce you to Mr. Musgrave."

Thus adjured, they have to come to a halt, and the presentation is made.

"Surely," think I, glancing at Barbara's face, slightly flushed by the heat, and still gently grave with the sobriety of expression left by devotion, "he *must* see the likeness now!" To ensure his having the chance of telling her that he does, I fall behind with Algy.

CHAPTER V.

CLARET cup has washed the dust from our throats; cold lamb and mayonnaise have restored the force of body and equanimity of mind which the exhausted air and long-drawn Gregorian chants of Tempest Church destroyed. Frank is lunching with us. He had accompanied us to our gates, and had then made a feint of leaving, but I had pressed him, with an eagerness proportioned to the seriousness of my design upon him, to accompany us, and he had yielded with a willing ease.

I cannot help thinking that Algy does not look altogether pleased with the arrange-

ment, but, after all, it is *my* house, and not Algy's. It is the first time that I have entertained a guest since the far-off childish birthdays, when the neighbours' little boys and girls used to be gathered together to drink tea out of the doll's tea service. In the afternoon, we all walk to church again, and in the same order. Barbara and Algy in front, Frank and I behind. I had planned differently, but Algy is obtuse, Barbara will come into no manœuvres, and Frank seems simply indifferent. So it happens, that all through the park, and up the bit of dusty white road, we are out of ear-shot of the other two.

"A sky worthy of Dresden!" says Mr. Musgrave, throwing back his head and looking up at the pale blue sultriness above our heads—the waveless, stormless ether sea—as we pace along, with the church-bells' measured ding-dong in our ears, and the cool ripe grasses about our feet.

"*Dear* Dresden!" say I, pensively, with a sigh of mixed regret and remorse, as I look back on the sunshiny hours that at the time I thought so long, in that fair, white foreign town.

"Dear Linkesches Bad!" says Frank, sighing too.

"Dear Grossegarten!" cry I, thinking of the long pottering stroll that Roger and I had taken one evening up and down its green alleys, and that *then* I had found so tedious.

"Dear Zwinger!" retorts Frank.

"Dear Weisserhirsch!" say I, half sadly. "Dear white acacias! dear drives under the acacias!"

"*Drives under the acacias!*" echoes Frank, dropping his accent of sentimentalism, and speaking rather sharply. "We never had any drives under the acacias! We never had any drives at all, that I recollect!"

"*You* had not, I daresay," reply I, carelessly, "but *we* had. They are the things that I look back at with the greatest pleasure of anything that happened there!"

Frank does not apostrophize as "*dear*" any other public resort; indeed, he turns away his head, and we walk on without uttering a word for a few moments.

"By-the-by," say I, with a laboured and not altogether successful attempt at appearing to speak with suddenness and want of premeditation, "what did you mean this morning, about that la—about Mrs. Huntley?"

"I meant nothing," he answers, but the faint quiver of a smile about his mouth contradicts his words.

"That is not true!" reply I, with impatient brusqueness; "why were you surprised at my not having heard of her?"

"I was not surprised."

"What is the use of so many false-

hoods?" cry I, indignantly; "at least I would choose some better time than when I was going to church for telling them. What reason have you for supposing that —that Roger knows more about her than I—than Barbara—do?"

"How persistent you are!" he says, with that same peculiar smile—not latent now, but developed—curbing his lips and lightening in his eyes. "There is no baffling you! Since you dislike falsehoods, I will tell you no more. I will own to you that I made a slip of the tongue; I took it for granted that you had been told a certain little history, which it seems you have *not* been told."

The blood rushes headlong to my face. It feels as if every drop in my body were throbbing and tingling in my cheeks, but I look back at him hardily.

"I don't believe there *is* any such history."

"I daresay not."

More silence. Swish through the buttercups and the yellow rattle; a lark, miles above our heads, singing the music he has overheard in heaven. Frank does not seem inclined to speak again.

"Your story is *not* true," say I presently, laughing uncomfortably, and unable to do the one wise thing in my reach, and leave the subject alone—"but untrue stories are often amusing, more amusing than the true ones. You may tell yours, if you like."

"I have not the slightest wish."

A few steps more. How quickly we are getting through the park! We shall reach the church, and I shall not have heard. I shall sit and stand and kneel all through the service with the pain of that gnawing curiosity—that hateful new vague jealousy aching at my heart.

It is *impossible!* I stop. I stand stock still in the summer grass.

"I *hate* your hints! I hate your innu-

endoes!" I say, passionately. "I have always lived with people who spoke their thoughts straight out! Tell me this moment! I will not move a step from this spot till you do."

"I have nothing worth speaking of to tell," he answers, slightly. "It is only that never having had a wife myself, I have taken an outsider's view; I have taken it for granted that when two people marry each other they make a clean breast of their past history—make a mutual confession of their former—"

He pauses, as if in search of a word.

"But supposing," cry I, eagerly, "that they have nothing to tell, nothing to confess—"

He shrugs his shoulders.

"That is so likely, is it not?"

"Likely or not," cry I, excitedly, "it was true in *my* case. If you had put me

on the rack, I could have confessed nothing!"

"I do not see the analogy," he answers coldly; "*you* are—what did you tell me? nineteen?—It is to be supposed"—(with a rather unlovely smile)—"that your history is yet to come; and he is—*forty-seven!* We shall be late for church!"—with a glance at Algy's and Barbara's quickly diminishing figures.

"I do not care whether we are late or not!" cry I, vehemently, and stamping on the daisy-heads as I speak. "I will not *stir* until you tell me."

"There is really no need for such excitement!" returns he with a cold smile; "since you will have it, it is only that rumour—and you know what a liar *rumour* is—says that once, some years ago, they were engaged to marry each other."

"And why did not they?" speaking with breathless panting, and forgetting my stout

asseveration that the whole tale is a lie.

"Because—mind, I *vouch* for nothing, I am only quoting rumour again—because—she threw him over."

"*Threw him over!*" with an accent of most unfeigned astonishment.

"You are surprised!" he says, quickly, and with what sounds to me like a slightly annoyed inflection of voice; "it *does* seem incredible, does not it? But at that time, you see, he had not all the desirables—not quite the pull over other men that he has now; his brother was not dead or likely to die, and he was only General Tempest, with nothing much beside his pay.

"*Threw—him—over!*" repeat I, slowly, as if unable yet to grasp the sense of the phrase.

"We shall *certainly* be late; the last bell is beginning," says Frank, impatiently.

I move slowly on. We have reached

the turnstile that gives issue from the park to the road. The smart farmers' wives, the rosy farmers' daughters, are pacing along through the powdery dust towards the church gate.

"Is she a *widow?*" ask I, in a low voice.

He laughs sarcastically.

"A widow indeed, and desolate, eh? No! I believe she has a husband somewhere about, but she keeps him well out of sight—away in the colonies. He is there now, I fancy."

"And why is not she with him?" cry I, indignantly; but the moment that the words are out of my mouth I hang my head. Might not *she* ask the same question with regard to *me?*

"She did not like the *sea*, perhaps," answers Frank, demurely.

CHAPTER VI.

A DAY—two days pass.

"More callers," say I, hearing the sound of wheels, and running to the window. "I thought we *must* have exhausted the neighbourhood yesterday and the day before!" I add, sighing.

"*Whoever they are*," says Barbara, anxiously, lifting her head from the work over which it is bent, "mind you do not ask after their relations! Think of the man whose wife you inquired after, and found that she had run away with his groom not a month before!"

"That certainly was one of my unlucky

things," answer I, gravely; then, beginning to laugh—"and I was so *determined* to know what had become of her too."

I am still looking out. It is a soft smoke-coloured day; half an hour ago, there was a shower—each drop a separate loud patter on the sycamore leaves—but now it is fair again. A victoria is coming briskly up the drive; servants in dark liveries; a smoke-coloured parasol that matches the day.

"Shall I ring, and say 'not at home?'" asks Barbara, stretching out her hand towards the bell.

"No, no!" cry I, hurriedly, in an altered voice, for the parasol has moved a little aside, and I have seen the face beneath.

In two minutes the butler enters and announces "Mrs. Huntley," and the "plain woman—not very young—about thirty—who cannot be very strong, as she sat down through the psalms," enters.

At first she seems uncertain *which* to greet as bride and hostess; indeed I can see that her earliest impulse is to turn from the small insignificance in silk, to the tall lithe loveliness in cotton, and as I perceive it, a little arrow — not of jealousy, for, thank God, I never was jealous of our Barbara—never—but of pain at my so palpable inferiority, shoots through all my being. But Barbara draws back, and our visitor perceives her error. We sit down, but the brunt of the talk falls on Barbara. I am never glib with strangers, and I throw in a word only now and then, all my attention and observation having passed into my eyes. A plain woman indeed! I have always been convinced of the unbecomingness of church, but *now* more than ever am I fully persuaded of it. And yet she is not pretty! Her mouth is very wide, that is perhaps why she so rarely laughs; her nose cannot say much for itself; her cheeks are

thin, and I *think*—nay, let me tell truth—I *hope* that in a low gown she would be *scraggy*, so slight even to meagreness is she! But how thoroughly made the most of! What a shapeless pincushion fit my gown seems beside the admirable French sit of hers! How hard, how metallic its tint beside the indefinite softness of that sweep of smoke colour! What a stiff British erection my hair feels beside the careless looseness of these shining twists! What a fine, slight hand, as if cut in faint gray stone!

At each fresh detail that I note, Musgrave's anecdote gains ever more and more probability; and my heart sinks ever lower and more low.

One hope remains to me. Perhaps she may be stupid! Certainly she is not *affording*.

How heavily poor Barbara is driving through the fine weather and the *Times!*

and how little more than "yes" and "no" does she get! I take heart. Roger loves people who talk—people who are merry and make jests. It was my most worthless gabble that first drew him towards me. Cheered and emboldened by this thought, I swoop down like a sudden eagle to the rescue.

"You know Rog——, my husband, do not you?" I say, with an abrupt bluntness that contrasts finely with the languid gentleness with which her little remarks steal out like mice. *Mine* rushes forth like a desolating bombshell.

"A little—yes."

"You knew him in India, did not you?" say I, unable to resist the temptation of seizing this opportunity to gratify my curiosity, drawing my chair a little nearer hers, and speaking with an eagerness which I, in vain, try to stifle.

"Yes," smiling sweetly, "in India."

"He was there a long time," continue I, communicatively.

"Yes?"

(Well, she *is* baffling! when she does not say "yes" affirmatively, she says it interrogatively).

"All the same he did not like it," I go on, with amicable volubility; "but I dare say you know that. They say—" (reddening, as I feel, perceptibly, and nervously twisting my pocket-handkerchief round my fingers)—"that people are so sociable in India: now I dare say you saw a good deal of him."

"Yes; we met several times."

She is smiling again. There is not a shade of hesitation or unreadiness in her low voice, nor does the faintest tinge of colour stain the fine pallor of her cheeks.

(It *must* have been a lie!)

"*Your* husband, too, is out——" I pause; not sure of the locality, but she

does not help me, so I add lamely, "*somewhere*, is not he?"

"He is in the West Indies."

"In the West Indies!" cry I, with animation, drawing my chair yet a little nearer hers, and feeling positively friendly; "why that is where *mine* is too!"

"Yes?"

"We are companions in misfortune," cry I, heartily; "we must keep up each other's spirits, must not we?"

Another smile, but no verbal answer.

A noise of feet coming across the hall—of manly whistling makes itself heard. The door opens and Algy enters. It is clear that he is unaware of there being any stranger present, for his hat is on his head, his hands are in his pockets, and he only stops whistling to observe—

"Well, Nancy! any more Aborigines?" then he breaks suddenly off, and we all grow red — he himself beaming of as

lively a scarlet as the new tunic that he tried on last night. I make a hurried and confused presentation, in which I manage to slur over into unintelligibility and utter doubtfulness the names of the two people made known to one another.

"One more Aborigine, you see!" says Mrs. Huntley, to my surprise—after the experience I have had of her fine taste in monosyllables—beginning the conversation. I look at her with a little wonder. Her voice is quite as low as ever, but there is an accent of playfulness in it; and on her face a sparkle of *esprit*, whose possible existence I had not conjectured. Certainly she showed no symptom of playfulness or esprit during our late talk. I have yet to learn that to some women, the presence of a man—not *the* man, but *a* man—any man—is what warm rain is to flowers athirst.

I am still marvelling at this metamorpho

sis, when the door again opens, and another guest is announced—an old man, as great a stranger to us as is the rest of the neighbourhood, but of whom we quickly discover that he is deadly deadly deaf. For five minutes, I bawl at him a series of remarks, each and all of which he misunderstands. He does it so invariably that I come at length to the conclusion that he is doing it on purpose, and stop talking in a huff. Then Barbara takes her turn—Barbara can always make deaf people hear better than I do, though she does not speak to them nearly so loud, and I rest on my oars. Owing to my position between the two couples, I can hear what is passing between Algy and Mrs. Huntley.

To tell the truth, I do not take much pains to avoid hearing it, for surely they can have no secrets. They are sitting rather close together, and speaking in a somewhat low key, but I am so used to

his voice, and her articulation is so distinct that I do not miss a word.

"I think I had the pleasure of seeing you in church, last Sunday," Algy says, rather diffidently; not having yet quite recovered from the humiliation engendered by his unfortunate remark.

She nods.

"And I you," with a gently reassuring smile.

"Did you really? did you see me—I mean us?"

"Yes, I saw you," with a delicate inflection of voice, which somehow confines the application of the remark to him. "I made up my mind—one takes ideas into one's head you know—I made up my mind that you were a *soldier;* one can mostly tell."

He laughs the flattered fluttered laugh that *my* rough speech was never known to provoke in living man.

"Yes, I am; at least I am going to be; I join this week."

"Yes?" with a pretty air of attention and interest.

"We—we—found out who *you* were," he says, laughing again, with a little embarrassment, and edging his chair nearer hers; "we asked Musgrave!"

"Mr. Musgrave!" (with a little tone of alert curiosity) "oh! you know *him?*"

"Know him! I should think so: he is quite a tame cat here."

"Yes?"

"Have you any *children?*" cry I suddenly, bundling with my usual fine tact head foremost into the conversation (where I am clearly not wanted, and altogether forgetting Barbara's warning injunction) with my unnecessary and malapropos query. For a moment she looks only astonished; then an expression of pain crosses her face, and a slight contraction

passes over her features. Evidently she *had* a child, and it is *dead*. She is going to *cry!* At this awful thought, I grow scarlet, and Algy darts a furious look at me. What *have* I said? I have outdone myself. How far worse a case than the fugitive wife whose destiny I was so resolute to learn from her injured husband!

"I am so sorry," I stammer—"I never thought—I did not know——"

"It is of no consequence," she answers, speaking with some difficulty, and with a slight but quite musical tremor in her voice—very different from the ugly gulpings and catchings of the breath, which always set off *my* tears—"but the fact is, that I *have* one little one—and—and—she no longer lives with me; my husband's people have taken her; I am sure that they meant it for the best; only—only—I am afraid I cannot quite manage to talk of her yet" (turning away from me, and look-

ing up into Algy's face with a showery smile). Then, as if unable to run the risk of any other further shock to her feelings, she rises and takes her leave; Algy eagerly attending her to the door.

The old deaf gentleman departs at the same time, loading Barbara with polite parting messages to her husband, and bowing distantly to *me*. Algy re-enters presently, looking cross and ruffled.

"You really are *too* bad Nancy!" he says harshly, throwing himself into the chair lately occupied by Mrs. Huntley. "You grow worse every day—one would think you did it on purpose—riding rough-shod over people's feelings."

I stand aghast. Formerly I used not to mind rough words; but I think Roger must have spoilt me; they make me wince now.

"But—but—it was not *dead!*" I say whimpering, "it had only gone to visit its grandmother."

"Never you mind, my Nancy!" says Barbara in a whisper, drawing me away to the window, and pressing her soft cool lips to the flushed misery of my cheeks; "she was not hurt a bit! her eyes were as dry as a bone!

CHAPTER VII.

ONE more day is gone. We are one day nearer Roger's return. This is the way in which I am growing to look at the flight of time; just as in Dresden, I joyfully marked each sunset as bringing me twenty-four hours nearer home and the boys. And now the boys are within reach; at a wish I could have them all round me; and still, in my thoughts, I hurry the slow days, and blame them for dawdling. With all their broad gold sunshine and their rainbow-coloured flowers, I wish them away.

Alas! that life should be both so quick and

so lagging! It is afternoon, and I am lying by myself on a cloak at the bottom of the punt—the *unupsettable* broad-bottomed punt. My elbow rests on the seat and a book is on my lap. Out in the middle of the pool, the glare from the water is unbearably bright, but *here*, underneath these dipping drooped trees, the sun only filters through in little flakes, and the shade is brown, and the reflections are so vivid that the flags hardly know which are themselves—they, or the other flags that grow in the water at their feet.

A while ago, I tried to read; but a private vexation of my own—a small new one—interleaved with its details each page of the story, and made nonsense of it. I have shut the volume therefore, and with my hat tilted over my eyes, and my cheek on my hand, am watching the long blue dragon-flies, and the numberless small peoples that inhabit the summer air. All

at once I hear some one coming, crashing and pushing through the woody undergrowth. Perhaps it is Algy come to say that he has changed his mind, and that he will not go after all! No! it is only Mr. Musgrave. I am a little disappointed, but as my fondness for my own company is always of the smallest, I am able to smile a sincere welcome.

"It is you, is it?" I say, with a little intimate nod. "How did you know where I was?"

"Barbara told me."

"*Barbara*, indeed!" (laughing), "I wish father could hear you."

"I am very glad he does not."

"And so you found her at home?" I say, with a feeling of pleased curiosity, as to the details of the interview. (He cannot well have volunteered the Abbey *already*, can he?)

"I suppose I may come in," he says,

hardly waiting my permission to jump into the punt, which however, by reason of the noble broadness of its bottom, is enabled to bid defiance to any such shock. "She was making a flannel petticoat for an old woman," he goes on, sitting down opposite me, and looking at me from under his hat brim, with gravely shining eyes; "*herring-boning*, she called it. She has been teaching me how to herring-bone. I like Barbara."

"How kind of you," I say, ironically, and yet a little gratified too. "And does she return the compliment, may I ask?"

He nods.

"Yes, I think so."

"She would like you better still if you were to lose all your money, and one of your legs, and be marked by the small-pox," I say, thoughtfully; "to be despised, and out at elbows, and down in the world, is the sure way to Barbara's heart."

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I had meant to have drawn for him a pleasant and yet most true picture of her sweet disinterestedness, but his uneasy vanity takes it amiss.

"As it entails being enrolled among the blind and lame," he says, smiling sarcastically, and flushing a little, "I am afraid I shall never get there."

A moment ago I had felt hardly less than sisterly towards him. Now I look at him with a disgustful and disapprobative eye. What a very great deal of alteration he needs, and with that face, and his Abbey, and all his rooks to back it, how very unlikely he is to get it. Well, *I* at least will do my best!

We both remain quiet for a few moments. Vick sits at the end of the punt, a shiver of excitement running all over her little white body, her black nose quivering, and one lip slightly lifted by a tooth, as she gazes with eager gravity at the distant wild ducks

flying along in a row, with outstretched necks, making their pleasant quacks. How low they fly; so low that their feet splash in the water, that makes a bright spray-line in the sun.

"Algy is going away to-morrow!" say I, presently.

"So he told me."

"This is his last evening here!" (in a rather dolorous tone).

"So I should gather," laughing a little at the obviousness of my last piece of imformation.

"And yet," say I, looking down through the clear water at a dead tree bough lying at the bottom, and sighing, "he is going to dine out to-night—to dine with Mrs. Huntley."

"With Mrs. Huntley! whew!" with a long-drawn whistle of intelligence.

"Tell me," cry I, impulsively, raising myself from my reclining pose, and sitting

upright, "you will understand better than I do—perhaps it is my mistake—but if you had seen a person only *once* for five or ten minutes, would you sign yourself 'yours very sincerely' to them?"

He laughs dryly.

"Not unless I was writing *after dinner* —why?"

"Nothing—no reason!"

Again he laughs.

"I think I can guess."

"Her name is Zéphine," say I again, leaning over the boat-side and pulling my forefinger slowly to and fro through the warm brown water.

"I am well aware of that fact" (smiling).

How near the swans are drawing towards us! One with his neck well thrown back, and his wings raised and ruffled, sailing along like a lovely snow-white ship; another with less grace and more homeli-

ness, standing on his head, with black webs paddling out behind.

"You were quite wrong on Sunday—*quite*," say I, speaking with sudden abruptness, and reddening.

"On Sunday!" (throwing his luminous dark eyes upwards to the light clouds and faint blue of the August sky above us, as if to aid his recollection), "nothing more likely—but what about?"

"About—Roger," I answer, speaking with some difficulty ("and Mrs. Huntley," I was going to add, but some superstition hinders me from coupling their names even in a sentence).

"I daresay"—carelessly—"but what new light have you had thrown upon the matter?"

"I asked her," I say, looking him full in the face, with simple directness.

"*Asked her!*" repeats he, with an accent of profound astonishment. "Asked the

woman whether she had been engaged to him, and jilted him? Impossible!"

"No! no!" cry I, with tremulous impatience, "of course not; but I asked her whether she used not to know him in India, and she said, 'Yes, we met several times,' just like *that*—she no more blushed and looked confused than *I* should if any one asked me whether I knew you!"

He is still leaning over the punt, and has begun to dabble as I did.

"You certainly have a way of putting things very strongly," he says in a rather low voice, "*convincingly* so!"

"She did not even know what part of the world he was in!" I cry, triumphantly.

"Did she say so?" (lifting up his face, and speaking quickly).

"Well, no—o—" I answer, reluctantly; "but I said, 'He is in the West Indies,' and she answered 'Yes,' or 'Indeed,' or 'Is he?' I forget which, but at any rate it implied that it was news to her."

A pike leaps not far from us, and splashes back again. I watch to see whether the widening faint circles will have strength to reach us, or whether the water's smile will be smoothed and straightened before it gets to us.

"Did Mrs. Huntley happen to say" (leaning lazily back, and speaking carelessly) "how she liked her house?"

"No; why?"

"She has only just got into it," he answers, slightly, "only about a fortnight, that is."

"I wonder," say I, ruminatingly, "what brought her to this part of the world, for she does not seem to know anybody."

He does not answer.

"We *ought* to be friends, ought not we?" say I, beginning to laugh nervously, and looking appealingly towards him, "both of us coming to sojourn in a strange land! It is a curious coincidence our both settling

here in such similar circumstances, at almost the same time, is not it?"

Still he is silent.

"*Is not it?*" cry I, irritably, raising my voice.

Again he has thrown his head back, and is perusing the sky, his hands clasped round one lifted knee.

"What *is* a coincidence?" he says, languidly. "I do not think I quite know—I am never good at long words—two things that happen accidentally at the same time, is not it?"

He lays the faintest possible stress on the word accidentally.

"And you mean to say that this is not accidental?" I cry, quickly.

"I mean nothing; I only ask for information."

How still the world is to-day. The feathery water-weeds sway, indeed, to and fro, with the motion of the water, but the

tall cats' tails, and all the flags, stand absolutely motionless. I feel vaguely ruffled, and take up my forgotten book. Holding it so as to hide my companion's face from me, I begin to read ostentatiously. He seems content to be silent; lying on the flat of his back, at the bottom of the punt, staring at the sky, and declining the overtures, and parrying the attacks, of Vick, who, having taken advantage of his supine position to mount upon his chest, now stands there wagging her tail, and wasting herself in efforts, mostly futile, but occasionally successful, to lick the end of his nose. A period of quiet elapses, during which, for the sake of appearances, I turn over a page. By-and-by, he speaks.

"Algy is your eldest brother, is not he? —get away, you little beast!"—(the latter clause, in a tone of sudden exasperation, is addressed, not to me, but to Vick, and tells me that my pet dog's endeavours

have been crowned with a tardy prosperity).

"Yes." (Still reading sedulously.)

"I thought so," with a slight accent of satisfaction.

"Why?" cry I, again letting fall my volume, and yielding to a curiosity as irresistible as unwise; for he had meant me to ask, and would have been disobliged if I had not.

"We all have our hobbies, don't you know?" he says, shifting his eyes from the sky, and fixing them on the less serene, less amiable object of my face—"some people's is old china—some Elzevir editions—*I* have a mania for *clocks*—I have one in every room of my house—by-the-by, you have never been over my house—Mrs. Huntley's—she is a dear little woman, but she has her fancies, like the rest of us, and hers is—*eldest sons!*"

"But she is married!" exclaim I, stu-

pidly. "What good can they do her, now?"—then, reddening a little at my own simplicity, I go on, hurriedly. "But he is such a boy!—younger than *you*—young enough to be her *son*—it *can* be only out of good-nature that she takes notice of him."

"Yes—true—out of good-nature!" he echoes, nodding, smiling, and speaking with that surface-assent, which conveys to the hearer no impression less than acquiescence.

"Boys are not much in her way, either," he pursues, carelessly; "generally she prefers such as are of *riper* years—*much* riper!"

"How spiteful you are!" I say, glad to give my chafed soul vent in words, and looking at him with that full, cold directness which one can employ only towards such as are absolutely indifferent to one. "How she *must* have snubbed you!"

For an instant, he hesitates; then

"Yes," he says, smiling still, though his face has whitened, and a wrathy red light has come into his deep eyes; "in the pre-Huntley era, I laid my heart at her feet —by the way, I must have been in petticoats at the time—and she kicked it away, as she had, no doubt, done—*others*."

The camel's backbone is broken. This last innuendo—in weight a straw—has done it. I speak never a word; but I rise up hastily, and, letting my novel fall heavily prone on the pit of its stomach at the punt-bottom, I take a flying leap to shore —*towards* shore, I should rather say—for I am never a good jumper—Tou Tou's lean spider-legs can always outstride me—and now I fall an inch or two short, and draw one leg out booted with river-mud. But I pay no heed. I hurry on, pushing through the brambles, and leaving a piece of my gown on each. Before I have gone five yards—his length of limb and freedom

from petticoats giving him the advantage over me—he overtakes me.

"What *has* happened? at this rate you will not have much gown left by the time you reach the house."

To my excited ears, there seems to be a suspicion of laughter in his voice. I disdain to answer. The path we are pursuing is not the regular one; it is a short cut through the wood. At its widest it is very narrow; and, a little ahead of us, a bramble has thrown a strong arm right across it, making a thorny arch, and forbidding passage. By a quick movement, Mr. Musgrave gets in advance of me, and, turning round, faces me at this defile.

"What *has* happened?"

Still I remain stubbornly silent.

"We are not going to fight, at this time of day, such old friends as we are?"

The red-anger light has died out of his eyes. They look softer, and yet less

languid, than I have ever seen them before; and there is subdued appeal and entreaty in his lowered voice. At the present moment, I distinctly dislike him. I think him altogether trying and odious, and I should be glad—yes, *glad*, if Vick were to bite a piece out of his leg; but, at the same time, I cannot deny that I have seldom seen anything comelier than the young man who now stands before me, with the green woodland lights flickering about the close-shorn beauty of his face—he is well aware that his are not features that need *planting out*—while a lively emotion quickens all his lazy being.

"We are *not* old friends! Let me pass!"

"*New* friends, then—*friends*, at all events!" coming a step nearer, and speaking without a trace of sneer, sloth, or languor.

"Not friends at all! Let me pass!"

"Not until you tell me my offence—not until you own that we are friends!" (in a tone of quick excitement, and almost of authority, that, in him, is new to me.)

"Then we shall stay here all night!" reply I, with a fine obstinacy, plumping down as I speak on the wayside grass, among the St. John's Worts, and the red arum berries. In a moment he has stepped aside, and is holding the stout purple bramble-stem out of my way.

"Pass, then!" he says, in a tone of impatience, frowning a little; "as you have said it, of course you will stick to it—right or wrong—or you would not be a woman; but, whether you confess it or not, we *are* friends!"

"We are NOT!!" cry I, resolute to have the last word, as I spring up and fly past him, with more speed than dignity, lest he should change his mind, and again detain me.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE swallows are gone: the summer is done: it is October. The year knows that I am in a hurry, and is hasting with its shortened days—each day marked by the loss of something fair—towards the glad Christmas time—Christmas that will bring me back my Roger—that will set him again at the foot of his table—that will give me again the sound of his foot on the stairs, the smile in his fond gray eyes. So I thought yesterday, and to-day I have heard from him; heard that though he is greatly loath to tell me so, yet he cannot be back by Christmas;

that I must hear the joy-bells ring, and see the merry Christmas cheer *alone.* It is true that he earnestly and insistantly begs of me to gather all my people, father, mother, boys, girls, around me. But after all, what are father, mother, boys, girls to me? Father never *was* anything, I will do myself that justice, but at this moment of sore disappointment as I lean my forehead on the letter outspread on the table before me, and dim its sentences with tears, I *be-little* even the boys. No doubt that by-and-by I shall derive a little solace from the thought of their company; that when they come I shall even be inveigled into some sort of hilarity with them; but at present, "No."

There are some days on which all ills gather together as at a meeting. This is one. Barbara is prostrated by a violent headache, and is in such thorough physical pain that even *she* cannot sympathise with

me. Mr. Musgrave never makes his now daily appearance,—he comes as I jubilantly notice as regularly as the postman,—until late in the afternoon. All day, therefore, I must refrain myself and be silent. And I am never one for brooding with private dumbness over my woes. I much prefer to air them by expression and complaint. About noon it strikes me that, *faute de mieux*, I will go and see Mrs. Huntley, tell her *suddenly* that Roger is not coming back, and see if she looks vexed or confused or grieved. Accordingly, soon after luncheon, I set off in the pony-carriage. It is a quiet sulky-looking uncoloured day. One uniform livery of mist clothes sky and earth, dimming the glories of the dying leaves, and making them look dull and sodden. Everything has a drenched air: each crimson bramble leaf is clothed in rain-drops, and yet it is not raining. The air is thick and heavy, and one swallows it

like something solid, but it is not raining: in fact it is an English fine day.

Under the delusive idea that it is warm or at least not cold, I have protected my face with no veil, my hands with no mittens; so that long before I reach the shelter of the Portugal laurels that warmly hem in and border Mrs. Huntley's little gravelled sweep, the end of my nose feels like an icy promontory at a great distance from me, and my hands do not feel at all. Mrs. Huntley *is* at home. Wise woman! I knew that she would be. I suppose that I follow on the footsteps of the butler more quickly than is usual, for, as the door opens, and before I can get a view of the inmate or inmates, I hear a hurried noise of scrambling, as of some one suddenly jumping up. For a little airy woman who looks as if one could blow her away—puff!—like a morsel of thistledown or a blow-ball, what a heavy foot Mrs. Huntley has! The

next moment I am disabused. Mrs. Huntley has clearly not moved. It was not *she* that scrambled. She is lying back in a deep arm-chair, her silky head gently denting the flowered cushion, the points of two pretty shoes slightly advanced towards the fire, and a large feather fan leisurely waving to and fro, in one white hand. Beyond the *fan* movement she is not *doing* anything that I can detect.

"How do you do?" say I, bustling in, in a hurry to reach the fire. "How comfortable you look! how cold it is! Algy!!" For the enigma of the noise is solved. It was Algy who shuffled and scuffled—yes, scuffled up from the low stool which he has evidently been sharing with the pretty shoes—at Mrs. Huntley's feet, on to his long legs, on which he is now standing, not at all at ease. He does not answer.

"ALGY!!" repeat I, in a tone of the profoundest, accentedest surprise, involun-

tarily turning my back upon my hostess and facing my brother.

"Well, what about me?" he cries tartly, irritated (and no wonder) by my open mouth and tragical air.

"What *has* brought you here?" I ask slowly, and with a tactless emphasis.

"The fly from the White Hart," he answers, trying to laugh, but looking confused and angry.

"But I mean—I thought you told me when I asked you to Tempest this week that you could not get away for an *hour!*"

"No more I could," he answers impatiently, yet stammering; "quite unexpected—did not know when I wrote—have to be back to-night."

"Will not you come nearer the fire?" says Mrs. Huntley, in her slow sugared tones, with a well-bred ignoring of our squabble. "I am sure that you must be perished with cold."

I recollect myself and comply. As I sit down I catch a glimpse of myself in the glass. It is indeed difficult to abstain from the sight of oneself, however little fond one may be of it, so thickly is the room set round with rose-draped mirrors. For the moment, oh friends, I will own to you that I appear to myself nothing less than *brutally* ugly. I know that I am not so in reality, that the disfigurement is only temporary, but none the less does the consciousness deeply, deeply depress me. My nose is of a lively scarlet, which the warmth of the room is quickly deepening into a lowering purple. My quick passage through the air has set my hat a little awry, giving me a falsely rakish air, and the wind has loosened my hair—not into a picturesque and comely disorder, but into mere untidiness. And, meanwhile, how admirably small and cool *her* nose looks! What rest and composure in her whole

pose! What a neat refinement in the disposition of her hair! What a soft luxury in her dress! Even my one indisputable advantage of *youth* seems to me as dirt. Looking at the completeness of her mature grace, I *despise* youth. I think it an ill and ugly thing in its green unripeness.

I look round the room. After the thick outside air, saturated with moisture, I think that the warm atmosphere would, were my spirit less disquieted, lull me quickly to sleep. How perfumed it is, not with any meretricious artificial scents, but with the clean and honest smell of sweet live flowers. Yes, though I am aware that Mrs. Huntley has no conservatory, yet hot-house flowers and airy ferns are scattered about the room in far greater profusion than in mine, with all Roger's imposing range of glass—scattered about here, there, and everywhere; not as if they were a rare and holiday treat,

but a most common every-day occurrence. There is not much work to be seen about, and *not a book!* On the other hand, lounging chairs, suited to the length or shortness of *any* back; rococo photograph stands, framing either a great many men, or a few men in a great many attitudes; soothing pictures—*décolleté* Venuses, Loves, Greuze-heads—tied up with rose-ribbon, and a sleepy half light. On a small table at the owner's elbow, a blue velvet jeweller's case stands open. On its white satin lining my long-sighted eyes enable me to decipher the name of Hunt and Roskell; and it does not need any long sight to observe the solid breadth of the gold band bracelet, set with large dull turquoises and little points of brilliant light, which is its occupant. As I note this phenomenon, my heart burns within me—yea, burns even more hotly than my nose. For father keeps Algy very tight, and I

know that he has only three hundred pounds a year, beside his pay.

"I have had such bad news to-day," I say, suddenly, looking my *vis-à-vis* full and directly in the face.

"Yes?"

So far she certainly shows no signs of emotion. Her fan is still waving with slow steadiness. I see the diamonds on her hands (whence did *they* owe their rise, I wonder,) glint in the fire-light.

"Roger is not coming back!"

"Not at all?" with a slight raising of the eyebrows.

"Not before Christmas, certainly."

"Really! how disappointing. I am very sorry!"

There is not a particle of sorrow in face or tone: only the counterfeit grief of an utterly indifferent acquaintance. My heart feels a little lightened.

"And have *you* no better luck, either?"

I say, more cheerfully. "Is there no talk of your—of Mr. Huntley coming back?"

Her eyelids droop; her breast heaves in a placid sigh.

"Not the slightest, I am afraid."

What to say next? I have had enough of asking after her child. I will not fall into *that* error again. Ask who all the men in the rococo frames are?—which of them, or whether any, is *Mr.* Huntley? On consideration, I decide not to do this either; and after one or two more stunted attempts at talk, I take my leave. I ask Algy to accompany me just down the drive, and with a most grudging and sulky air of unwillingness he complies. Alas! he always used to like to be with us girls. The ponies are fresh, and we have almost reached the gate before I speak, with a difficult hesitation.

"Algy," say I, "did you happen to notice that—that *bracelet?*"

He does not answer. He is looking the other way, and turns only the back of his head towards me.

"It was from Hunt and Roskell," I say.

"Oh!"

"It must have—must have—*come to* a good deal," I go on timidly.

He has turned his face to me now. I cannot complain, but indeed, as it now is, I prefer the back of his head, so white and headstrong does he look.

"I wish to God," he says, in a voice of low anger, "that you would be so obliging as to mind your own business, and allow me to mind mine!"

"But it *is* mine!" I cry, passionately; "what right has she to be sitting all day with young men on stools at her feet?—she, a married woman, with her husband—"

"This comes extremely well from *you*," he says, in a voice of concentrated anger,

with a bitterly sneering tone; "*how is Musgrave?*"

Before I can answer, he has jumped out, and is half way back to the house. But indeed I am dumb. Is it possible that *he* makes such a mistake?—that he does not see the difference?

For the next half-mile, I see neither ponies, nor misty hedges, nor wintry high-road, for tears. I *used* to get on so well with the boys!

CHAPTER IX.

WHEN I return home, I find that Barbara is still no better. She is still lying in her darkened room, and has asked not to be disturbed. And even *my* wrongs are not such as to justify my forcing myself upon the painful privacy of a sick headache. How much the better am I then than I was before my late expedition? I have brought home my old grievance quite whole and unlightened by communication, and I have got a new and fresh one in addition, with absolutely no one to whom to impart it; for even when Frank comes, I will certainly not tell

him. I am too restless to remain indoors over the fire, though thoroughly chilled by my late drive, and resolve to try and restore my circulation by a brisk walk in the park.

The afternoon is still young, and the day is mending. A wind has risen, and has pulled aside the steel-coloured cloud curtain, and let heaven's eyes—blue, though faint and watery—look through. And there comes another strong puff of autumnal wind, and lo, the sun! and the leaves float down in a sudden shower of amber in his light. I march along quickly and gravely through the long drooped grass—no longer sweet and fresh and upright, in its green summer coat—through the frost-seared pomp of the bronze bracken, till I reach a little knoll, whose head is crowned by twelve great brother beeches. From time immemorial they have been called the Twelve Apostles, and under one apostle I now stand, with

my back against his smooth and stalwart trunk.

How becoming is death to them! Into what a glorious crimson they decline! My eyes travel from one tree group to another, and idly consider the many-coloured majesty of their decay. Over all the landscape there is a look of plaintive uncontent. The distant town, with its two church spires, is choked and effaced in mist: the very sun is sickly and irresolute. All nature seems to say, "Have pity upon me —I die!"

It is not often that our mother is in sympathy with her children. Mostly when we cry she broadly laughs; when we laugh and are merry she weeps; but to-day my mood and hers match. The tears are as near my eyes as hers—as near hers as mine.

"'See the leaves around us falling!'"

say I, aloud, stretching out my right arm in

dismal recitation. We had the hymn last Sunday, which is what has put it into my head.

"'See the leaves around us falling,
Dry and withered to the ground—'"

Another voice breaks in,

"'Thus to thoughtless mortals calling—'"

"How you made me jump!" cry I, descending with an irritated leap to prose, and at least making the leaves say something entirely different from what they had ever been known to say before.

"Why did not you bring your sentinel, Vick?"

He—it is Musgrave, of course—has joined me, and is leaning his flat back also against the apostle, and like me, is looking at the mist, at the red and yellow leaves—at the whole low-spirited panorama.

"She is ill," say I, lamentably, drawing a portrait in lampblack and Indian ink of

the whole family; "we are *all* ill—Barbara is ill!"

"Poor Barbara!"

"She has got a headache."

"Poor Barbara!"

"And I have got a heartache," say I, more for the sake of preserving the harmony of my sketch, and for making a pendant to Barbara, than because the phrase accurately describes my state.

"Poor *you!*"

"*Poor me, indeed!*" cry I, with emphasis, and to this day I cannot make up my mind whether the ejaculation were good grammar or no.

"I have had *such* bad news," I continue, feeling, as usual, a sensible relief from the communication of my grief, "Roger is not coming back!"

"*Not at all?*"

The words are the same as those employed by Mrs. Huntley; but there is

much more alacrity and liveliness in the tone.

"*Not at all!*" repeat I, scornfully, looking impatiently at him; "that is so likely, is not it?"—then, "No not *at all*"—I continue, ironically, "he has run off with some one else—some one *black!*" (with a timely reminiscence of Bobby's happy flight of imagination).

"Not till *when*, then?"

"Not till after Christmas," reply I, sighing loudly, "which is almost as bad as not at all."

"I knew *that!*" he says, rather petulantly; "you told me *that* before!"

"*I told you that* before?" cry I, opening my eyes, and raising my voice; "why, how could I? I only heard it myself this morning!"

"It was not you then," he says, composedly, "it must have been some one else!"

"It *could* have been no one else," retort I, hastily. "I have told no one—no one at least from whom *you* could have heard it."

"All the same, I *did* hear it," (with a quiet persistence); "now who could it have been?" throwing back his head, elevating his chin, and lifting his eyes in meditation to the great depths of burning red in the beech's heart, above him,—"ah!"—(overtaking the recollection)—"I know!"

"Who?" say I, eagerly, "not that it *could* have been any one."

"It was Mrs. Huntley!" he answers with an air of matter-of-fact indifference.

I laugh with insulting triumph. "Well, that *is* a bad hit! What a pity that you did not fix upon some one else! I have once or twice suspected you of drawing the long-bow—*now* I am sure of it! As it happens, I have just come from Mrs. Huntley, and she knew no more about it than the babe unborn!"

I am looking him full in the face, but, to my surprise, I cannot detect the expression of confusion and defeat which I anticipate. There is only the old white anger look that I have such a happy knack of calling up on his features.

"I *am* a consummate liar!" he says quietly, though his eyes flash. "Every one knows *that;* but all the same, she *did* tell me."

"I do not believe a word of it," cry I, in a fury.

He makes no answer, but lifting his hat, begins to walk quickly away. For a hundred yards I allow him to go unrecalled; then, as I note his quickly diminishing figure and the heavy mists beginning to fold him, my resolution fails me, I take to my heels and scamper after him.

"Stop!" say I, panting as I come up with him; "I daresay—perhaps—you

thought you were speaking truth!—there must, must be some *mistake!*"

He does not answer, but still walks quickly on.

"Tell me!" cry I, posting on alongside of him, breathless and distressed—"when was it? where did you hear it? how long ago?"

"I never heard it?"

"Yes, you did," cry I, passionately, asseverating what I have so lately and passionately denied. "You know you did; but when was it? how was it? where was it?"

"It was *nowhere*," he answers with a cold, angry smile. "I was '*drawing the long-bow!*'"

I stop in baffled rage and misery. I stand stock-still, with the long dying grass wetly and limply clasping my ankles. To my surprise he stops too.

"I wish you were *dead!*" I say tersely, and it is not a figure of speech. For the moment I do honestly wish it.

"Do you?" he answers, throwing me back a look of hardly inferior animosity; "I dare say; I do not much mind." A little pause, during which we eye each other, like two fighting-cocks. "Even if I *were* dead," he says, in a low voice—"mind, I do not blame you for wishing it—sometimes I wish it myself—but even if I *were*, I do not see how that would hinder Sir Roger and Mrs. Huntley from corresponding."

"They *do not* correspond," cry I, violently; "it is a falsehood!" Then, with a quick change of thought and tone, "But if they do, I—I—do not mind! I—I—am very glad—if Roger likes it! There is no harm in it."

"Not the slightest."

"Do you *always* stay at home?" cry I, in a fury, goaded out of all politeness and reserve by the surface false acquiescence of his tone; "do you *never* go away? I *wish* you would! I wish"—(speaking between

laughing and crying)—"that you could take your Abbey up on your back, as a snail does its shell, and march off with it into another county."

"But unfortunately I cannot."

"What have I done to you?" I cry, falling from anger to reproach, "that you take such delight in hurting me? You can be pleasant enough to—to other people. I never hear you hinting and sneering away any one else's peace of mind; but as for me, I never—*never* am alone with you that you do not leave me with a pain—a tedious long ache *here*"—(passionately clasping my hands upon my heart).

"Do not I?"—(Then half turning away in a lowered voice)—"*nor you me!*"

"*I!*" repeat I, positively laughing in my scorn of this accusation. "*I* hint! *I* imply! why, I *could* not do it, if I were to be shot for it! it is not *in* me!"

He does not immediately answer; still, he is looking aside, and his colour changes.

"Ask mother, ask the boys, ask Barbara," cry I, in great excitement, "whether I ever *could* wrap up anything neatly, if I wished it ever so much? Always, *always*, I have to blurt it out! *I* hint!"

"Hint! no!" he repeats, in a tone of vexed bitterness. "Well, no! no one could accuse you of *hinting!* Yours is honest, open cut and thrust!"

"If it is," retort I, bluntly, still speaking with a good deal of heat, "it is your own fault! I have no wish to quarrel, being such near neighbours, and—and—altogether—of course I had rather be on good terms than bad ones! When you *let* me—when you leave me alone—I *almost*—sometimes I *quite* like you. I am speaking seriously! I *do*."

"You do not say so?" again turning his

head aside, and speaking with the objectionable intonation of irony.

"At home," pursue I, still chafing under the insult to my amiability, "I never was reckoned quarrelsome—*never!* Of course I was not like Barbara—there are not many like her—but I did very well. Ask *any one* of them—it does not matter which—they will all tell you the same—whether I did not!"

"You were a household angel, in fact?"

"I was nothing of the kind," cry I, very angry, and yet laughing: the laughter caused by the antagonism of the epithet with the many recollected blows and honest sounding cuffs that I have, on and off, exchanged with Bobby.

A pause.

The sun has quite gone now: sulky and feeble, he has shrunk to his cold bed in the west, and the victor-mist creeps, crawls, and soaks on unopposed.

"Good-night!" cry I suddenly. "I am going!" and I am as good as my word.

With the triple agility of health, youth, and indignation, I scurry away through the melancholy grass, and the heaped and fallen leaves, home.

CHAPTER X.

DING dong bell! ding dong bell! The Christmas bells are ringing. Christmas has come—Christmas as it appears on a Christmas card, white and hard, and beset with puffed-out, ruffled robins. Only Nature is wise enough not to express the ironical wish that we may have a "merry one."

For myself, I have but small opinion of Christmas as a time of jollity. Solemn—*blessed*, if you will—but no, not jovial. At no time do the dead so clamour to be remembered. Even those that went a long time ago, the regret for whose de-

parture has settled down to a tender, almost pleasant pain; whom at other times we go nigh to forget; even they cry out loud, "Think of us!"

When all the family is gathered, when the fire burns quick and clear, and the church-bells ring out grave and sweet, neither will *they* be left out. But, on the other hand, to one who has paid his bills, and in whose family Death's cannon have as yet made no breaches, I do not see why it may not be a season of moderate, placid content.

Festivity! jollity! *never!* I have paid my bills, and there are no gaps among my people. Sometimes I tremble when I think how many we are; one of us must go soon. But, as yet, when I count us over, none lacks. Father, mother, Algy, Bobby, the Brat, Tou Tou. Slightly as I have spoken of them to myself, and conscientiously as I have promised myself to

derive no pleasure from their society, and even to treat them with distant coolness, if they are, any of them, and Bobby especially—it is he that I most mistrust—more joyfully disposed than I think fitting, yet my heart has been growing ever warmer and warmer at the thought of them, as Christmas time draws nigh; and now, as I kiss their firm, cold, healthy cheeks—(I declare that Bobby's cheeks are as hard as marbles), I know how I have lied to myself.

Father is not in quite so good a humour as I could have wished, his man having lost his hat-box *en route*, and consequently his nose is rather more aquiline than I think desirable.

"Do not be alarmed!" says Bobby, in a patronizing aside, introducing me, as if I were a stranger, to father's peculiarities; "a little infirmity of temper, but the *heart* is in the right place."

"Bobby," say I anxiously, in a whisper, "has he—has he brought the *bag?*"

Bobby shakes his head.

"I *knew* he would not," cry I, rather crestfallen. Then, with sudden exasperation, "I wish I had not given it to him; he always *hated* it. I wish I had given it to Roger instead."

"Never you mind!" cries Bobby, while his round eyes twinkle mischievously; "I daresay he has got one by now, a nice one, all beads and wampum, that the old Begum has made him."

I laugh, but I also sigh. What a long time it seems since I was jealous of Bobby's Begum! We are a little behind father, whispering with our heads together, while he, in his raspingest voice, is giving his delinquent a month's warning. That tone! it still makes me feel sneaky.

"Bobby," say I, putting my arm through his substantial one, and speaking in a low

tone of misgiving, "how is he? how has he been?"

"We have been a little fractious," replies Bobby, leniently—"a little disposed to quarrel with our bread and butter; but as you may remember, my dear, from *your* experience of our humble roof, Christmas never was our happiest time."

"No, never," reply I, pensively.

The storm is rising: at least father's voice is. It appears that the valet is not only to go, but to go without a character.

"Never you mind," repeats Bobby, reassuringly, seeing me blench a little at these disused amenities, pressing the hand that rests on his arm against his stout side; "it is nothing to *you!* bless your heart, you are the apple of his eye."

"Am I?" reply I, laughing. "It has newly come to me if I am."

"And I am his 'good, brave Bobby!'—his 'gallant boy!'—do you know why?"

"No."

"Because I am going to Hong Kong, and he hears that they are keeping two nice roomy graves open all the time there!"

"You are *not?*" (in a tone of keen anxiety and pain); then, with a sudden change of tone to a nervous and constrained amenity—"Yes, it *is* a nice-sized room, is not it? My only fault with it is that the windows are so high up that one cannot see out of them when one is sitting down."

For father, having demolished his body-servant, and reduced mother to her usual Niobe state, now turns to me, and, in his genialest, happiest society manner, compliments me on my big house.

That is a whole day ago. Since then, I have grown used to seeing father's austere face, unbent into difficult suavity, at the opposite end of the dinner-table to me, to hearing the well-known old sound

of Tou Tou's shrieks of mixed anguish and delight, as Bobby rushes after her in headlong pursuit, down the late so silent passages; and to looking complacently from one to another of the holiday faces round the table, where Barbara and I have sat, during the last noiseless months, in stillest dialogue or preoccupied silence.

I *love* noise. You may think that I have odd taste; but I *love* Bobby's stentor laugh, and Tou Tou's ear-piercing yells. I even forget to think whether their mirth passes the appointed bounds I had set it. I have mislaid my receipt of cold repression. My heart goes out to them.

I have been a little disturbed as to how to dispose of father during the day, but he mercifully takes that trouble off my hands. Providence has brought good out of evil, congenial occupation out of the hat-box. He has spent all the few daylight hours in telegraphing for it to every station on the

line; in telling several home-truths to the porters at our own station, which—it being Christmas time, and they consequently all more or less tipsy—they have taken with a bland playfulness that he has found a little trying; and, lastly, in writing a long letter to the *Times*. And I, meanwhile, being easy in my mind on his score, knowing that he is happy, am at leisure to be happy myself. In company with my brethren, I have spent all the little day in decorating the church, making it into a cheerful green Christmas bower. We always did it at home.

The dusk has come now—the quick-hurrying December dusk, and we have all but finished. We have had to beg for a few candles, in order to put our finishing touches. Here and there about the sombre church they flame, throwing little jets of light on the glossy laurel leaves that make collars round the pillars' stout necks;

on the fresh moss-beds, vividly green, in the windows; on the dull round holly berries. In the gloom the ivy twines in cunning garlands round the rough sculptured font, and the oak lectern; and above God's altar, a great white cross of hot-house flowers blooms delicately, telling of summer, and matching the words of old good news beneath it, that brought, as some say, summer, or, at least, the hope of summer, to the world.

Yes, we have nearly done. The Brat stands on the top of a step-ladder, dexterously posing the last wintry garland; and all we others are resting a moment—we and our coadjutors. For we have *two* coadjutors. Mr. Musgrave, of course. Now, at this moment, through the gray light, and across the candles, I can see him leaning against the font, while Barbara kneels with bent head at his feet, completing the ornamentation of the pedestal.

I always knew that things would come right if we waited long enough, and *coming* right they are—*coming*, not *come*, for still he has not spoken. I have consulted each and all of my family, father excepted, as to the average length of time allotted to *unspoken* courtship, and each has assigned a different period; the *longest*, however, has been already far exceeded by Frank. Tou Tou, indeed, adduces a gloomy case of a young man, who spent two years and a half in dumb longing, and broke a blood-vessel and died at the end of them; but this is so discouraging an anecdote that we all pooh-pooh it as unauthentic.

"Perhaps he does not mean to speak at all!" says the Brat, starting a new and hazardous idea; "perhaps he means to take it for granted!"

"Walk out with her, some fine morning," says Algy, laughing, "and say, like

Wemyck, 'Hallo! here's a church! let's have a wedding!'"

"It would be a very good thing," retorts the Brát gravely, "if there were a printed form for such occasions; it would be a great relief to people."

This talk did not happen in the church, but at an evening séance over night. Our second coadjutor is Mrs. Huntley.

"I am afraid I am not very efficient," she says, with a pathetic smile, "I can't *stand* very long, but if I might be allowed to sit down now and then, I might perhaps be some little help."

And sat down she has accordingly, ever since on the top pulpit step. It seems that Algy cannot stand very long either; for he has taken possession of the step next below the top one, and there he abides. Thank Heaven! they are getting dark now! If *legitimate* lovers, whose cooing is desirable and approved, are a sickly and sickening

spectacle, surely the sight of illegitimate lovers would make the blood boil in the veins of Moses, Miriam or Job.

Bobby, Tou Tou and I, having no one to hang over us, or gowk amorously up at us, are sitting in a row in our pew. Bobby has garlanded Tou Tou preposterously with laurel, to give us an idea, as he says, of how he himself will look by-and-by after some future Trafalgar. Now he is whispering to me—a whisper accompanied by one of those powerful and painful nudges, with which he emphasizes his conversation on his listener's ribs.

"Look at him!" indicating his elder brother, and speaking with a tone of disgust and disparagement, "did you ever see such a *Beast* as he looks?"

"Not often!" reply I readily, with that fine intolerance, which one never sees in full bloom after youth is past.

"I say, Nancy!" with a second and

rather lesser nudge, "if ever you see any symptoms of—of *that*—" (nodding towards the pulpit) "in me——"

"If—" repeat I scornfully, "of course I shall!"

"Well, that is as may be, but if you *do*, mind what I tell you—do not say anything to anybody, but—*put an end to me!* it does not matter *how;* smother me with bolsters; run your bodkin up to its hilt in me——"

"Even if I *did*," interrupt I, laughing, "I should never reach any vital part—you are *much* too fat!"

"I should not be so fat then," returns he gravely, amiably overlooking the personality of my observation, "love would have pulled me down!"

The Brat has nearly finished. He is nimbly descending the ladder, with a long guttering dip in his right hand.

"The other two——" begins Bobby,

thoughtfully, turning his eyes from pulpit to font.

"I do not mind *them* half so much," interrupt I indulgently; "they are not half so disgusting."

"Has he done it yet?" (lowering his cheerful loud voice to an important whisper).

I shake my head.

"Not unless he has done it since luncheon! he had not *then*; I asked her."

"I am beginning to think that *your* old man's plan was the best, after all," continues Bobby, affably. "I thought him rather out of date, at the time, for applying to your parents, but, after all, it saved a great deal of trouble, and spared us a world of suspense."

I am silent; swelling with a dumb indignation at the epithet bestowed on my Roger; but unable to express it outwardly, as I well know that if I do, I shall be triumphantly quoted against myself.

"Who will break it to Toothless Jack?" says Bobby presently, with a laugh; "after all the expense he has been at, too, with those teeth! it is not as if it were a beggarly two or three, but a whole complete new set — thirty-two individual grinders!"

"Such beauties, too!" puts in Tou Tou cackling.

"It is a thousand pities that they should be allowed to go out of the family," says Bobby warmly. "Tou Tou, my child—" (putting his arm round her shoulders)—"a bright vista opens before you!—your charms are approaching maturity!—with a little encouragement he might be induced to lay his teeth—two and thirty, mind—at your feet!"

Tou Tou giggles and asserts that she will "kick them away, if he does." Bobby mildly but firmly remonstrates and points out to her the impropriety and ingratitude

of such a line of conduct. But his arguments, though acute and well put, are not convincing, and the subject is continued, with ever increasing warmth, all the way home.

CHAPTER XI.

IT is Christmas Day—a clean white Christmas, pure and crisp. Wherever one looks, one's eyes water cruelly. For my part, I am very thankful that it did not occur to God to make the world always white. I hate snow's blinding livery. Each tiniest twig on the dry harsh trees is overladen with snow. It is a wonder that they do not break under it; nor is there any wind to shake down and disperse it. Tempest is white; the church is white: the whole world colourless and blinding. I have been in the habit of looking upon Vick as

a white dog; to-day she appears disastrously dark—a dirty brunette. Soap and water having entirely failed to restore her complexion. Bobby kindly proposes to *pipeclay* her.

We have all been to church, and admired our own decorations. And through all the prayer and the praise, and the glad Christmas singing, my soul has greatly hungered for Roger. Yes, even though all the boys are round me—Bobby on this side, the Brat on that—Algy directly in front; all behaving nicely too; for are not they right under father's eyes? Yes, and for the matter of that, under the Rector's too, as he towers straight above us, under his ivy-bush—the ivy-bush into which Bobby was so anxious yesterday to insert some mistletoe.

Church is over now, and the short afternoon has also slipped by. We are at dinner; we are dining early to-night—at

half-past six o'clock, as we are to have a dance for the servants afterwards. Any hospitality to my equals I have steadily and stoutly declined, but it seems a shame to visit my own loneliness on the heads of the servants, to whom it is nothing. They have always had a Christmas dance in Roger's reign, and so a dance they are to have now. We have religiously eaten our beef and plum pudding, and have each made a separate little blue fire of burnt brandy in our spoon.

It is dessert now, and father has proposed Roger's health. I did not expect it, and I never was so nearly betrayed into feeling fond of father in my life. They all drink it, each wishing him something good. As for me, I have been a fool always, and I am a fool now. I can wish him nothing, my voice is choked and my eyes drowned in inappropriate tears; only, from the depths of my heart, I ask God to give him

everything that He has of choicest and best. For a moment or two, the wax-lights, the purple grapes, the gleaming glass and shining silver, the kindly, genial faces swim blurred before my vision. Then I hastily wipe away my tears, and smile back at them all. As I raise my glistening eyes, I meet those of Mr. Musgrave fixed upon me—(he is the only stranger present). His look is not one that wishes to be returned; on the contrary, it is embarrassed at being met. It is a glance that puzzles me, full of inquiring curiosity, mixed with a sort of mirth. In a second—I could not tell you why—I look hastily away.

"I wonder what he is doing *now, this very minute!*" says Tou Tou, who is dining in public for the first time, and whose conversation is checked and her deportment regulated by Bobby, who has been at some pains to sit beside her, and who guides her behaviour by the help of

many subtle and unseen pinches under the table; from revolting against which a fear of father hinders her, a fact of which Bobby is most basely aware.

"Had not you better telegraph?" asks Algy, with languid irony (Algy certainly is not quite so nice as he used to be). "Flapping away the blue-tailed fly with a big red and yellow bandana, probably."

"Playing the banjo for a lot of little niggers to dance to!" suggests the Brat.

"They are all wrong, are not they, Nancy?" says Bobby, in a lowered voice, to me, on whose left hand he has placed himself; "he is sitting in his verandah, is not he? in a palm hat and nankeen breeches, with his arm round the old Wampoo."

"I daresay," reply I, laughing. "I hope so," for indeed I am growing quite fond of my dusky rival.

The ball is to be in the servants' hall;

it is a large long room, and thither, when all the guests are assembled, we repair. We think that we shall make a greater show, and inspire more admiration, if we appear in pairs. I therefore make my entry on father's arm. Never with greater trepidation have I entered any room, for I am to open the ball with the butler, and the prospect fills me with dismay. If he were a venerable family servant, a hoary-headed old seneschal, who had known Roger in petticoats, it would have been nothing. I could have chattered filially to him; but he is a youngish man, who came only six months ago. On what subjects can we converse? I feel small doubt that his own sufferings will be hardly inferior in poignancy to mine.

The room is well lit, and the candles shine genially down from the laurel garlands and ivy festoons which clothe the walls. They light the faces and various

dresses of a numerous assembly—every groom, footman, housemaid, and scullion from far and near. The ladies seem largely to preponderate both in number and aplomb; the men appearing, for the most part, greatly disposed to run for shelter behind the bolder petticoats; particularly the stablemen. The footmen, being more accustomed to ladies' society, are less embarrassed by their own hands, and by the exigencies of chivalry. This inversion of the usual attitude of the sexes will, no doubt, be set more than right when we have retired. The moment has arrived. I quit father's arm—for the first time in my life I am honestly sorry to drop it—and go up to my destined partner.

"Ashton," say I, with an attempt at an easy and unembarrassed smile, "will you dance this quadrille with me?"

"Thank you, my lady."

How calm he is! how self-possessed.

Oh that he would impart to me the secret of his composure! I catch sight of the Brat, who is passing at the moment.

"Brat!" cry I, eagerly, snatching at his coat sleeve, like a drowning man at a straw. "Will *you* be our *vis-à-vis?*"

"All right," replies the Brat, gaily, "but I have not got a partner yet."

Off he goes in search of one, and Ashton and I remain *tête-à-tête.* I suppose I ought to take his arm, and lead him to the top of the room. After a moment of hot hesitation I do this. Here we are, arrived. Oh, why did I ask him so soon! Two or three minutes elapse before the Brat's return.

"How nicely you have all done the decorations!"

"I am glad you think so, my lady."

"They are better than ours at the church."

"Do you think so, my lady?"

A pause. Everybody is choosing partners. Tou Tou, grinning from ear to ear, is bidding a bashful button-boy to the merry dance. Father—do my eyes deceive me?—father himself is leading out the housekeeper. Evidently he is saying something dignifiedly humorous to her, for she is laughing. I wish that he would sometimes be dignifiedly humorous to us, or even humorous without the dignity. Barbara, true to her life-long instincts, is inviting the clergyman's shabby, gawky man-of-all-work, at whom the ladies'-maids are raising the nose of contempt. Mr. Musgrave is soliciting a kitchen wench.

"Are there as many here as you expected?"

"Quite, my lady."

Another pause.

"I hope," with bald affability, in desperation of a topic, "that you will all enjoy yourselves!"

"Thank you, my lady!"

Praise God! here is the Brat at last! Owing, I suppose, to the slenderness and fragile tenuity of his own charms, the Brat is a great admirer of fine women, the bigger the better; quantity, not quality; and true to his colours he now arrives with a neighbouring cook, a lady of sixteen stone, on his arm.

We take our places. While chassezing and poussetting, thank Heaven, a very little talk goes a very long way. My mind begins to grow more easy. I am even sensible of a little feeling of young elation at the sound of the fiddles gaily squeaking. I can look about me and laugh inwardly at the distant sight of Tou Tou and the button-boy turning each other nimbly round; of father, in the fourth figure, blandly backing between Mrs. Mitchell and a cook-maid.

We have now reached the fifth. At the

few balls I have hitherto frequented it has been a harmless figure enough ; hands all round, and a repetition of *l'été.* But *now*—oh, horror! what do I see? Everybody far and near is standing in attitude to gallopade. The Brat has his little arm round the cook's waist—at least not all the way round—it would take a lengthier limb than his to effect *that;* but a bit of the way, as far as it will go. An awful idea strikes me. Must Ashton and I gallopade too? I glance nervously towards him. He is looking quite as apprehensive at the thought that I shall expect him to gallopade with me, as I am at the thought that he will expect me to gallopade with him. I do not know how it is that we make our mutual alarm known to each other, only I know that while all the world is gallopading round us, we gallopade not. Instead we take hands, and jig distantly round each other.

The improvised valse soon ends, and I look across at the Brat. Gallant boy! the beads of perspiration stand on his young brow, but there is no look of blenching! When the time comes he will be ready to do it again.

As I stand in silent amusement watching him, having, for the moment, no dancing duties of my own, I hear a voice at my elbow, Bobby's, who having come in later than the rest of us, has not been taking part in the dance.

"Nancy! Nancy!" in a tone of hurried excitement, "for the love of heaven look at *father!* if you stand on tip-toe you will be able to see him; he has been *gallopading!* when I saw his venerable coat-tails flying, a feather would have knocked me down! you really ought to see it" (lowering his voice confidentially) "it might give you an idea about your own old man and the old Wam——"

"*Hang* the old Wampoo!" cry I, with inelegant force, laughing.

The duty part of the evening is over now. We have all signalised ourselves by feats of valour. I have scampered through an unsociable country dance with the head coachman, and have had my smart gown of faint pink and pearl colour nearly torn off my back by the ponderous-footed pair that trip directly after me. We have, in fact, done our duty and may retire as soon as we like. But the music has got into our feet, and we promise ourselves one valse among ourselves before we depart.

The Brat is the only exception. He still cleaves to his cook; dancing with her is a *tour de force*, on which he piques himself. Mrs. Huntley and Algy are already flying down the room in an active, tender embrace. I have been asked as long ago as before dinner by Mr. Musgrave. I was

rather surprised and annoyed at his inviting *me* instead of Barbara; but as, with this exception, his conduct has been unequivocally demonstrative, I console myself with the notion that he looks upon me as the necessary pill to which Barbara will be the subsequent jam.

The first bars of the valse are playing when Bobby comes bustling up. Healthy jollity and open mirth are written all over his dear, fat face.

"Come along, Nancy! let us have *one* more scamper before we die!"

"I am engaged to Mr. Musgrave," reply I, with a graceless and discontented curl of lip, and raising of nose.

"All right!" says Bobby, philosophically, walking away, "I am sure I do not mind, only I had a fancy for having *one* more spin with you."

"So you shall!" cry I, impulsively, with a sharp thought of Hong Kong, running

after him and putting his solid right arm round my waist.

Away we go in mad haste. Like most sailors Bobby dances well. I am nothing very wonderful, but I suit *him*. In many musicless waltzings of winter evenings, down the lobby at home, we have learnt to fit each other's step exactly.

At our first pausing to recover breath I become sensible of a face behind me, of a fierce voice in my ear,

"I had an idea, Lady Tempest, that this was *our* dance!"

"So it was!" reply I, cheerfully; "but you see I have cut you!"

"So I perceive!"

"Had not you better call Bobby out!" cry I, with a jeering laugh, tired of his eternal black looks. "You really are *too* silly! I wish I had a looking-glass here to show you your face!"

"Do you?" (very shortly).

Repartee is never Frank's forte. This is all that he now finds with which to wither me. However, even if he had anything more or more pungent to say, I should not hear him, for I am beginning to dance off again.

"What a fool he is to care!" says Bobby, contemptuously, "after all, he is an ill-tempered beast! I suppose if one kicked him down-stairs it would put a stop to his marrying Barbara, would not it?"

I laugh.

"I suppose so."

It is over now. The last long drawn out notes have ceased to occupy the air. As far as *we* are concerned, the ball is over, for we have quitted it. We have at length removed the *gêne* of our presence from the company, and have left them to polka and schottische their fill until the morning. We have reached our own part of the house. My cheeks are burning and throbbing

with the quick unwonted exercise. My brain is pleasantly stirred: a hundred thoughts in a second run galloping through it. I leave the others in the warm-lit drawing-room, briskly talking and discussing the scene we have quitted, and slip away through the door, into a dark and empty adjacent ante-room, where the fire lies at death's door, low and dull, and the candles are unlighted.

I draw the curtains, unbar the shutters, and lifting the heavy sash, look out. A cold still air, sharp and clear, at once greets my face with its frosty kisses. Below me, the great house-shadow projects in darkness, and beyond it lies a great and dazzling field of shining snow, asleep in the moonlight.

Snow trees, snow bushes, sparkle up against the dusk quiet of the sky. No movement anywhere! absolute stillness! perfect silence! It is broken now, this

silence, by the church clock with slow wakefulness chiming twelve. Those slow strokes set me a-thinking. I hear no longer the loud and lively voices next door, the icy penetration of the air is unfelt by me, as I lean, with my elbow on the sill, looking out at the cold grace of the night. My mind strays gently away over all my past life—over the last important year. I think of my wedding, of my little live wreath of sweet Nancies, of our long dusty journey, of Dresden.

With an honest, stinging heart-pang, I think of my ill-concealed and selfish weariness in our twilight walks and scented drives, of the look of hurt kindness on his face, at his inability to please me. I think of our return, of the day when he told me of the necessity for his voyage to Antigua, and of my own egotistic unwillingness to accompany him. I think of our parting, when I shed such plenteous tears—tears

that seem to me now to have been so much more tears of remorse, of sorrow that I was not sorrier, than of real grief. In every scene I seem to myself to have borne a most shabby part.

My meditations are broken in upon by a quick step approaching me, by a voice in my ear—Algy's.

"You are *here*, are you? I have been looking for you everywhere! Why, the window is *open!* For heaven's sake let me get you a cloak! you know how delicate your chest is. For *my* sake, *do!*"

It is too dark to see his face, but there is a quick excited tenderness in his voice.

"*My* chest delicate!" cry I, in an accent of complete astonishment. "Well, it is news to me if it is! My dear boy, what has put such an idea into your head? and if I got a cloak, I should think it would be for my *own* sake, not yours!"

He has been leaning over me in the

dusk. At my words, he starts violently and draws back.

"It is *you*, is it?" he says, in an altered voice of constraint, whence all the mellow tenderness has fled.

"To be sure!" reply I, matter-of-factly. "For whom did you take me?"

But though I ask, alas! I know.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW are unmusical people to express themselves when they are glad? People with an ear and a voice can sing, but what is to become of those who have not? Must they whoop inarticulately? For myself, I do not know one tune from another. I am like the man who said that he knew two tunes, one was "God Save the Queen," and the other was not. And yet to-day I have as good a heart for singing as ever had any of the most famous songsters. In tune, out of tune, I must lift up my voice. It is as urgent a need for me as for any mellow

thrush. For my heart—oh, rare case!—is fuller of joy than it can hold. It brims over. Roger is coming back. It is February, and he has been away nearly seven months. All minor evils and anxieties—Bobby's departure for Hong Kong, Algy's increasing besotment about Mrs. Huntley, and consequent slight estrangement from me—(to me a very bitter thing)—Frank's continued silence as regards Barbara—all these are swallowed up in gladness.

When *he* is back, all will come right. Is it any wonder that they have gone wrong, while *I* only was at the helm? My good news arrived only this morning, and yet, a hundred times in the short space that has elapsed since then, I have rehearsed the manner of our meeting, have practised calling him "Roger," with familiar ease, have fixed upon my gown and the manner of my coiffure, and have wearied Barbara

with solicitous queries, as to whether she thinks that I have grown perceptibly plainer in the last seven months, whether she does not think one side of my face better looking than the other, whether she thinks—(with honest anxiety this)—that my appearance is calculated to repel a person grown disused to it. To all which questions, she with untired gentleness gives pleasant and favourable answers.

The inability under which I laboured of refraining from imparting *bad* news is tenfold increased in the case of good. I must have some one to whom to relate my prosperity. It will certainly *not* be Mrs. Huntley this time. Though I have struggled against the feeling as unjust, and disloyal to my faith in Roger, I still cannot suppress a sharp pang of distrust and jealousy, as often as I think of her, and of the relation made to me by Frank, as to her former connection with my husband. Neither am I in

any hurry to tell Frank. To speak truth, I am in no good humour with him, or with his unhandsome shilly-shallying, and unaccountable postponement of what became a duty months ago.

Never mind! this also will come right when Roger returns. The delightful stir and hubbub in my soul hinder me from working or reading, or any tranquil indoor occupation; and, as afternoon draws on, fair and not cold, I decide upon a long walk. The quick exercise will perhaps moderately tire me, and subdue my fidgetiness by the evening, and nobody can hinder me from thinking of Roger all the way.

Barbara has a cold — a nasty, stuffy, choky cold; so I must do without her. Apparently I must do without Vick too. She makes a feint, indeed, of accompanying me half way to the front gate, then sits down on her little shivering haunches,

smirks, and when I call her, looks the other way, affecting not to hear. On my calling more peremptorily, "Vick! Vick!" she tucks her tail well in, and canters back to the house on three legs.

So it comes to pass that I set out quite alone. I have no definite idea where to go —I walk vaguely along, following my nose, as they say, smiling foolishly, and talking to myself—now under my breath—now out loud. A strong south-west wind blows steadily in my face: it sounded noisy and fierce enough as I sat in the house; but there is no vice or malevolence in it—it is only a soft bluster.

Alternate clouds and sunshine tenant the sky. The shadows of the tree-trunks lie black and defined across the road—branches, twigs, everything—then comes a sweep of steely cloud, and they disappear, swallowed up in one uniform gray: a colourless moment or two passes, and the

sun pushes out again; and they start forth distinct and defined, each little shoot and great limb, into new life on the bright ground. I laugh out loud, out of sheer jollity, as I watch the sun playing at hide-and-seek with them.

What a good world! What a handsome, merry, sweetly-coloured world! Unsatisfying? disappointing?—not a bit of it! It must be people's own fault if they find it so.

I have walked a mile or so before I at length decide upon a goal, towards which to tend — a lone and distant cottage, tenanted by a very aged, ignorant, and feudally loyal couple—a cottage sitting by the edge of a brown common—one of the few that the greedy hand of tillage has yet spared—where geese may still stalk and hiss unreproved, and errant tinker donkeys crop and nibble undisturbed,—

> "Where the golden furze
> With its green thin spurs
> Doth catch at the maiden's gown."

It is altogether a choice and goodly walk; next to nothing of the tame high-road. The path leads through a deep wooded dell; over purple plough-lands; down retired lanes.

After an hour and a quarter of smartish walking, I reach the door. There are no signs of ravaging children about. Long, long ago—years before this generation was born—the noisy children went out; some to the churchyard; some, with clamour of wedding-bells, to separate life. I knock, and after an interval hear the sound of pattens clacking across the flagged floor, and am admitted by an old woman, dried and pickled, by the action of the years, into an active cleanly old mummy, and whose fingers are wrinkled even more than time has done it, by the action of soapsuds. I am received with the joyful reverence due to my exalted station, am led in, and posted right in front of the little red fire and the

singing kettle, and introduced to a very old man, who sits on the settle in the warm chimney-corner, dressed in an ancient smock-frock, and with both knotted hands clasped on the top of an old oak staff. He is evidently childish, and breaks now and then into an anile laugh, at the thought, no doubt, of some dead old pothouse jest. A complication arises through his persisting in taking me for a sister of Roger's, who died thirty years ago, in early girlhood, and addressing me accordingly. I struggle a little for my identity, but finding the effort useless, resign it.

"This poor ould person is quoite aimless," says his wife with dispassionate apology; "but what can you expect at noinety-one?"

(Her own years cannot be much fewer.)

I say tritely that it is a great age.

"He's very fatiguin' on toimes!—that he is!" she continues, eyeing him with con-

templative candour — "he crumbles his wittles to that extent that I 'ave to make him sit upo' the *News of the World*."

As it seems to me that the conversation is taking a painful direction, I try to divert it by telling my news; but the bloom is again taken off it by the old man, who declines to be disabused of the idea that the Peninsular is still raging, and that it is Roger's *grandfather* who is returning from that field of glory. After a few more minutes, during which the old wife composedly tells me of all the children she has buried—she has to think twice before she can recollect the exact number,—and in the same breath remarks, "How gallus bad their 'taters were last year," I take my departure, and leave the old man still nodding his weak old head, and chuckling to the kettle.

On first leaving the house, I feel dashed and sobered. The inertness and

phlegmatic apathy of dry and ugly old age seem to weigh upon and press down the passionate life of my youth, but I have not crossed a couple of ploughed fields and seen the long slices newly ploughed, lying rich and thick in the sun; I have not heard two staves of the throstle's loud song before I have recovered myself. I also begin to sing. I am not very harmonious perhaps, I never am; and I wander now and then from the tune; but it is good enough for the stalking geese, my only audience, except a ragged jackass, who, moved by my example, lifts his nose and gives vent to a lengthy bray of infinite yearning.

I am half way home now. I have reached the wood—Brindley wood; henceforth I am not very likely to forget its name. The path dips at once and runs steeply down, till it reaches the bottom of the dell, along which a quick brook runs

darkling. In summer, when the leaves are out, it is twilight here at high noonday. Hardly a peep of sky to be seen through the green arch of oak and elm; but now, through the network of wintry twigs one looks up, and sees the faint far blue, for the loss of which no leafage can compensate. Winter brownness above, but a more than summer green below—the heyday riot of the mosses. Mossed tree trunks, leaning over the bustling stream; emerald moss carpets between the bronze dead leaves; all manner of mosses; mosses with little night-caps; mosses like doll's ferns; mosses like plump cushions; and upon them here and there blazes the glowing red of the small peziza cups.

I am still singing; and as no wind reaches this shadowed hollow, I have taken off my hat, and walk slowly along, swinging it in my hand. It is a so little frequented place, that I give an involuntary start, and

my song suddenly dies, when, on turning a corner, I come face to face with another occupant. In a moment I recover myself. It is only Frank, sitting on a great lichened stone, staring at the brook and the trees.

"You seem very cheerful!" he says, rising, stretching out his hand, and not (as I afterwards recollect) expressing the slightest surprise at our unlikely rencontre.

"I never heard you lift up your voice before."

"I seem what I am," reply I, shortly. "I *am* cheerful."

"You mostly are."

"That is all that *you* know about it," reply I, brusquely, rather resenting the accusation.

"I have not been *at all* in good spirits all this—this autumn and winter, not, that is, compared to what I usually am."

"Have not you?"

"I *am* in good spirits to-day, I grant

you," continue I, more affably; "it would be very odd if I were not. I should jump out of my skin if I were quite sure of getting back into it again; I have had *such* good news."

"Have you? I wish *I* had," (sighing). "What is it?"

"I will give you three guesses," say I, trying to keep grave, but breaking out everywhere, as I feel, into badly suppressed smiles.

"Something about the boys, of course!" —(half fretfully,)—"it is always the boys."

"It is nothing about the boys—quite wrong. That is *one*."

"The fair Zéphine is no more?—by-the-by, I suppose I should have heard of that."

"It is nothing about the fair Zéphine——wrong again! That is *two!*"

"Barbara has got leave to stay till Easter?"

"Nothing about Barbara!"—(with a slight momentary pang at the ease and unconcern with which he mentions her name)—"By-the-by, I wish you would give up calling her 'Barbara;' she never calls you 'Frank!' There, you have had your three guesses, and you have never come within a mile of it—I shall have to tell you—*Roger is coming back!*" opening my eyes and beginning to laugh joyously.

"*Soon?*" with a quick and breathless change of tone, that I cannot help perceiving, turning sharply upon me.

"*At once!*" reply I, triumphantly; "we may expect him *any day!*"

He receives this information in total silence. He does not attempt the faintest or slightest congratulation.

"I wish I had not told you!" cry I, indignantly; "what a fool I was to imagine that you would feel the slightest interest in anything that did not concern yourself per-

sonally! Of course" (turning a scarlet face and blazing eyes full upon him), "I did not expect you to *feel* glad—I have known you too long for that—but you might have had the common civility to *say* you were!"

We have stopped. We stand facing each other in the narrow wood-path, while the beck noisily babbles past, and the thrushes answer each other in lovely dialogue. He is deadly pale; his lips are trembling, and his eyes—involuntarily I look away from them!

"I am *not* glad!" he says, with slow distinctness; "often—often you have blamed me for *hinting* and *implying*, for using innuendoes and half words, and once—*once*, do you recollect?—you told me to my face that I *lied!* Well, I will not *lie* now; you shall have no cause to blame me to-day. I will tell you the truth, the truth that you know as well as I do—I am *not* glad!"

Absolute silence. I could no more answer or interrupt him than I could soar up between the dry tree boughs to heaven. I stand before him with parted lips, and staring eyes fixed in a stony, horrid astonishment on his face.

"Nancy," he says, coming a step nearer, and speaking in almost a whisper, "*you* are not glad either! For once speak the truth! Hypocrisy is always difficult to you. You are the worst actress I ever saw—speak the truth for once! Who is there to hear you but me? I, who know it already—who have known it ever since that first evening in Dresden! Do you recollect?—but of course you do—why do I ask you? Why should you have forgotten any more than I?"

Still I am silent. Though I stand in the free clear air of heaven, I could not feel more choked and gasping were I in some close and stifling dungeon, hundreds

of feet underground. I think that the brook must have got into my brain, there is such a noise of bubbling and brawling in it. Barbara, Roger, Algy, a hundred confused ideas of pain and dismay jostle each other in my head.

"Why do you look at me so?" he says, hoarsely. "What have I done? For God's sake, do not think that I blame you! I never have been so sorry for any one in my life as I have been for you—as I was for you from the first moment I saw you! I can see you now, as I first caught sight of you—weariness and depression in every line of your face——"

I can bear no more. At his last words, a pain like a knife, sharp to agony, runs through me. It is the grain of truth in his wicked, lying words that gives them their sting. I *was* weary; I *was* depressed; I *was* bored. I fling out my arms with a sudden gesture of despair, and then, throw-

ing myself down on the ground, bury my face in a great moss cushion, and put my fingers in my ears.

"Oh, my God!" I cry, writhing, "what *shall* I do?—how *can* I bear it?"

After a moment or two I sit up.

"How *shameful* of you!" I cry, bursting into a passion of tears. "What sort of women can you have lived amongst? what a hateful mind you must have! And I thought that you were a nice fellow, and that we were all so comfortable together!"

He has drawn back a pace or two, and now stands leaning against one of the bent and writhen trunks of the old trees. He is still as pale as the dead, and looks all the paler for the burning darkness of his eyes.

"Is it possible," he says, in a low tone of but half suppressed fury, "that you are going to *pretend* to be surprised?"

"*Pretend!*" cry I, vehemently; "there

is no pretence about it! I never was so horribly, miserably surprised in all my life!"

And then, thinking of Barbara, I fall to weeping again, in utter bitterness and discomfiture.

"It is *impossible!*" he says, roughly. "Whatever else you are, you are no fool; and a woman would have had to be blinder than any mole not to see whither I—yes, and *you*, too—have been tending! If you meant to be *surprised* all along when it came to this, why did you make yourself common talk for the neighbourhood with me? Why did you press me, with such unconventional eagerness, to visit you? Why did you reproach me if I missed one day?"

"*Why did I?*" cry I, eagerly. "Because——"

Then I stop suddenly. How, even to clear myself, can I tell him my real reason?

"And now," he continues, with deepening excitement, "now that you reap your own sowing, you are *surprised—miserably surprised!*"

"I am!" cry I, incoherently. "You may not believe me, but it is true—as true as that God is above us, and that I never, *never* was tired of Roger!"

I stop, choked with sobs.

"Yes," he says, sardonically, "about as true. But, be that as it may, you must at least be good enough to excuse me from expressing *joy* at his return, seeing that he fills the place which I am fool enough to covet, and which, but for him, *might*—yes, say what you please, deny it as much as you like—*would* have been mine!"

"It *never* would!" cry I, passionately. "If you had been the last man in the world—if we had been left together on a desert island—I *never* should have liked you, *never!* I *never* would have seen more

of you than I could help! There is *no one* whose society I grow so soon tired of. I have said so over and over again to the boys."

"Have you?"

"What good reason can you give me for preferring you to him?" I ask, my voice trembling and quivering with a passionate indignation; "I am here, ready to listen to you if you can! How are you such a desirable substitute for him? Are you nobler? cleverer? handsomer? unselfisher?—if you are" (laughing bitterly), "you keep it mighty well hid."

No reply: not a syllable.

"It is a *lie*," I cry, with growing vehemence, "a vile, base, groundless lie, to say that I am not glad he is coming back! Barbara knows—they *all* know how I have been *wearying* for him all these months. I was not *in love*, as you call it, when I married him—often I have told

him that—and perhaps at Dresden I missed the boys a little—he knows that too—he understands! but now—*now*—" (clasping my hands upon my heart, and looking passionately upwards with streaming eyes), "I want no one—*no one* but him! I wish for nothing better than to have *him*—*him only!*—and to-day, until I met *you*—till you made me loathe myself and you, and every living thing—it seemed to me as if all the world had suddenly grown bright and happy and good at the news of his coming."

Still he is silent.

"Even if I had not liked *him*," pursue I, finding words come quickly enough now, and speaking with indignant volubility, as, having risen, I again face him: "even if I had wanted to flirt with some one, why on earth should I have chosen *you?*" (eyeing him with scornful slowness, from his wide-awake to his shooting-boots)—"*you*, who

never even *amused* me in the least! Often when I have been talking to you, I have yawned till the tears came into my eyes! I have been afraid that you would notice it. If I had known" (speaking with great bitterness), "I should have taken less pains with my manners."

He does not answer a word. What answer *can* he make? He still stands under the wintry tree, white to lividness; drops of cold sweat stand on his brows; and his fine nostrils dilate and contract, dilate and contract in an agony of anger and shame.

"What *could* have put such an idea into your head?" cry I, clasping my hands, while the tears rain down my cheeks; as—my thoughts again flying to Barbara—I fall from contempt and scorn to the sharpest reproach. "Who would have thought of such a thing? when there are so many better and prettier people who, for all I know, might

have liked you. What wicked perversity made you fix upon *me* who, even if I had not belonged to any one else, could never, *never* have fancied you!"

"Is that true?" he says, in a harsh, rough whisper; "are you sure that you are not deceiving yourself? are you sure that under all your rude words you are not nearer loving me than you think?—that it is not that—with that barrier between us—you cannot reconcile it to your conscience——"

"Quite, *quite* sure!" interrupt I, with passionate emphasis, looking back unflinchingly into the angry depths of his eyes; "it has nothing to say to conscience! it has nothing to say to the *wrongness* of it" (crimsoning as I speak). "If it were quite right—if it were my *duty*—if it were the only way to save myself from *hanging*" (reaching after an ever higher and higher climax), "I *never*, NEVER could say that I was fond of you! I

do not see what there is to be fond of *in* you! before God, I do not!"

"There!" he says, hoarsely, stretching out his hand, as if to ward off a blow, "that will do!—stop!—you will never outdo that!"

A moment's pause.

Down in the loneliness of this dell, the twilight is creeping quickly on: when once it begins it tarries not. Out in the open country I dare say that it is still broad daylight; but here, the hues of the moss carpet are growing duller, and the brook is darkening. In a sudden panic, I hastily catch up my hat, which has fallen to the ground, and without a word or look of farewell, begin to run fast along the homeward path. Before I have gone ten yards he has overtaken me. His face is distorted by passion out of all its beauty.

"Nancy," he says, in a voice rendered almost unrecognizable by extreme agitation,

walking quickly alongside of me, "we are not going to part like this!"

"Do not call me Nancy!" cry I, indignantly, "it makes me *sick!*"

"What does it matter what I call you?" he cries, impatiently; "of what consequence is such a trifle? I will call you by what name you please, but for this once you *must* listen to me. I know as well as you do, that it is my last chance!"

"*That* it is!" put in I, viciously.

The path is beginning to rise. After mounting the slope, we shall soon be out of the wood, and in the peopled open again.

"How can I help it, if I have gone mad?" he cries violently, evidently driven to desperation by the shortness of the time before him.

"Mad!" echo I, scornfully, "not a bit of it! you are as sane as I am!"

All this time we are posting along in

mad haste. Thank God! the highroad is in sight, the cheerful, populous, light high-road. The trees grow thinner, and the path broadens. Even from here, we can plainly see the carts and carters. He stops, and making me stop too, snatches both my hands.

"Nancy!" he says harshly, stooping over me, while his eyes flame with a haggard light. "Yes, I *will* call you so this once—to me now you *are* Nancy! I will *not* call you by *his* name! Is it *possible?* You may say that it is my egotism; but, at a moment like this, what is the use of shamming—of polite pretence? Never, *never* before in all my life have I given love without receiving it, and I *cannot* believe"—(with an accent of passionate entreaty)—"that I do now! Feeling for you as I do, do you feel absolutely *nothing* for me?"

"*Feel!*" cry I, driven out of all modera-

tion by disgust and exasperation. "Would you like to know how I feel? I feel *as if a slug had crawled over me!*"

His face contracts, his eyes darken with a raging pain. He *throws* my hands—the hands a moment ago so jealously clasped—away from him.

"Thank you!" he says, after a pause, in a stiff voice of constraint. "I am satisfied!"

"And a very good thing too!" say I, sturdily, still at boiling point, and diminishing with quick steps the small space still intervening between me and the road.

"Stay!" he says, overtaking me once again, as I reach it, and laying his hand in detention on my arm. "One word more! I should be sorry to part from you—such friends as we have been"—(with a sneer)—"without *one* good wish. Lady Tempest, I hope"—(smiling with malevolent

irony)—"that your fidelity will be rewarded as it deserves."

"I have no doubt of it!" reply I, steadily; but even as I speak, a sharp jealous pain runs through my heart. Thank God! he cannot see it!

CHAPTER XIII.

YES, here out in the open it is still quite light; it seems two hours earlier than it did below in the dark dingle—light enough as plainly to see the faces of those one meets as if it were midday. I suppose that my late companion and I were too much occupied by our own emotions to hear, or at least notice the sound of wheels approaching us; but no sooner have I turned and left him, before I have gone three paces, than I am quickly passed by an open carriage and pair of grays—*quickly*, and yet slowly enough for me to recognize the one occupant. As to her—

for it is Mrs. Huntley—she must have seen me already, as I stood with Mr. Musgrave on the edge of the wood, exchanging our last bitter words.

It is impossible that she could have helped it; but even had it been possible—had there been any doubt on the subject, that doubt would be removed by the unusual animation of her attitude, and the interest in her eyes, that I have time to notice, as she rolls past me.

I avert my face, but it is too late. She has seen my hat thrown on anyhow, as it were with a pitchfork—has seen my face swollen with weeping, and great tears still standing unwiped on my flushed cheeks. What is far, *far* worse, she has seen him, too. This is the last drop in an already over-full cup.

There is nothing in sight now—not even a cart—so I sit down on a heap of stones by the road-side, and covering my hot face

with my hands, cry till I have no more eyes left to cry with. Can *this* be the day I called good? Can *this* be that bright and merry day, when I walked elate and laughing between the deep furrows, and heard the blackbird and thrush woo their new loves, nor was able myself to refrain from singing.

My brain is a black chaos of whirling agonies, now together, now parting; so that each may make their separate sting felt, and, in turn, each will have to be faced. Pre-eminent amongst the dark host, towering above even the thought of Barbara, is the sense of my own degradation. There must have been something in my conduct to justify his taking me so confidently for the bad light woman he did. One does not get such a character for nothing. I have always heard that when such things happen to people, they have invariably brought them on themselves. In inco-

herent misery, I run over in my head, as well as the confusion of it will let me, our past meetings and dialogues. In almost all, to my distorted view, there now seems to have been an unseemly levity. Things I have said to him; easy familiar jokes that I have had with him; not that *he* ever had much sense of a jest—(even at this moment I think this incidentally)—course through my mind.

Our many *tête-à-têtes* to which, at the time, I attached less than no importance: through many of which I unfeignedly irresistibly *gaped;* our meetings in the park—accidental, as I thought—our dawdling saunters through the meadows, as often as not at twilight; all, *all* recur to me, and, recurring, make my face burn with a hot and stabbing shame.

And *Roger!* This is the way in which I have kept things straight for him! This is the way in which I have rewarded his

boundless trust! he, whose only fear was lest I should be dull! lest I should not amuse myself! Well, I have amused myself to some purpose now. I have made myself *common talk for the neighbourhood!* *He* said so. I have brought discredit on Roger's honoured name! Not even the consciousness of the utter cleanness of my heart is of the least avail to console me. What matter how clean the heart is, if the conduct be light? None but God can see the former; the latter lies open to every carelessly spiteful, surface-judging eye. And Barbara! Goaded by the thought of her, I rise up quickly, and walk hastily along the road, till I reach a gate into the park. Arrived there, and now free from all fear of interruption from passers by, I again sit down on an old dry log that lies beneath a great oak, and again cover my face with my hands.

What care I for the growing dark?

the darker the better! Ah! if it were dark enough to hide me from myself! How shall I break it to her—I, who, confident in my superior discernment, have always scouted her misgivings and turned into derision her doubts? If I thought that she would rave and storm, and that her grief would vent itself in *anger*, it would not be of half so much consequence. But I know her better. The evening has closed in colder. The birds have all ceased their singing, and I still sit on, in the absolute silence, unconscious—unaware of anything round me; living only in my thoughts, and with a resolution growing ever stronger and stronger within me. I will *not* tell her! I will *never* tell *any one*. I, that have hitherto bungled and blundered over the whitest fib, will wade knee-deep in falsehoods, before I will ever let any one guess the disgrace that has happened to me. Oh that, by long silence, I could wipe it out of

my own heart—out of the book of unerasable past deeds.

Of course, by the cessation of his visits, Barbara will learn her fate in time. *In time.* Yes! but till then—till the long weeks in their lapse have brought the certainty of disappointment and mistake? How can I—myself knowing—watch her gentle confidence (for latterly her doubts—and whose would not?—have been set at rest) decline through all the suffering stages of uneasy expectation and deferred hope, to the blank dull sickness of despair? How, without betraying myself, see her daily with wistful eyes looking—with strained ears listening—for a face and a step that come not? If she were one to love lightly, one of the many women who, when satisfied that it is no longer any use to cry and strive for the unattainable, the out of reach, clip and pare their affections

to fit the attainable, the within reach—! But I know differently.

Hitherto, whenever love has been offered to her—and the occasions have been not few—she has put it away from her; most gently, indeed, with a most eager desire to pour balm and not vinegar into the wounds she has made; with a most sincere sorrow, and a disproportioned remorse at being obliged to cause pain to any living thing; yet with a quiet and indifferent firmness, that left small ground for lingering hopes. And now, having once loved, she will be slow to unlove again.

It is quite dark now—as dark, at least, as it will be all night—and two or three stars are beginning to quiver out, small and cold, in the infinite distances of the sky. The sight of them, faintly trembling between the bare boughs of the trees, is the first thing that calls me back to the consciousness of outward things. Again I

rise, and begin to walk, stumbling through the long wet knots of the unseen grass, towards the house. But when I reach it—when I see the red gleams shining through the chinks of the window-shutters—my heart fails me. Not yet can I face the people, the lights—Barbara! I turn into the garden, and pace up and down the broad lonely walks: I pass and re-pass the cold River Gods of the unplaying fountain. I stand in the black night of the old cedar's shade. On any other day no possible consideration would have induced me to venture within the jurisdiction of its inky arms after night-fall; to-day, I feel as if no earthly or unearthly thing would have power to scare me. How long I stay, I do not know. Now and then, I put up my hands to my face, to ascertain whether my cheeks and eyes feel less swollen and burning; whether the moist and searching night-air is restoring me to

my own likeness. At length, I dare stay no longer for fear of being missed, and causing alarm in the household. So I enter, steal upstairs, and open the door of my boudoir, which Barbara and I, when alone, make our usual sitting-room. The candles are unlit; and the warm fire—evidently long undisturbed—is shedding only a dull and deceiving light on all the objects over which it ranges. So far, at least, fortune favours me. Barbara and Vick are sitting on the hearth-rug, side by side. As I enter, they both jump up, and run to meet me. One of them gives little raptured squeaks of recognition. The other says, in a tone of relief and pleasure,

"Here you are! I was growing so frightened about you! What can have made you so late?"

"It was so — so — pleasant! The thrushes were singing so!" reply I, thus

happily inaugurating my career of invention.

"But, my dear child, the thrushes went to bed two hours ago!"

"Yes," I answer, at once entirely nonplussed, "so they did!"

"Where *have* you been?" she asks, in a tone of ever-increasing surprise. "Did you go farther than you intended?"

"I went—to see—the old Busseys," reply I, slowly; inwardly pondering, with a stupid surprise, as to whether it can possibly have been no longer ago than this very afternoon, that the old man mistook me for the dead Belinda—and that I held the old wife's soapy hand in farewell in mine; "the—old—Busseys!" I repeat, "and it took —me a long—*long* time to get home!"

I shiver as I speak.

"You are cold!" she says, anxiously. "I hope you have not had a chill—" (taking my hands in her own slight ones)

—"yes—*starved!*—poor dear hands; let me rub them!" (beginning delicately to chafe them).

Something in the tender solicitude of her voice, in the touch of her gentle hands, gives me an agony of pain and remorse. I snatch away my hands.

"No! no!" I cry, brusquely, "they do very well!"

Again she looks at me, with a sort of astonishment, a little mixed with pain; but she does not say anything. She goes over to the fire, and stoops to take up the poker.

"Do not!" cry I, hastily, "there is plenty of light!—I mean"—(stammering) "it—it dazzles me, coming in out of the dark."

As I speak, I retire to a distant chair, as nearly as possible out of the firelight, and affect to be occupied with Vick, who has jumped up on my lap, and—with all a

dog's delicate care not to hurt you *really* —is pretending severely to bite every one of my fingers. Barbara has returned to the hearth-rug. She looks a little troubled at first; but, after a moment or two, her face regains its usual serene sweetness.

"And I have been here ever since you left me!" she says, presently, with a look of soft gaiety. "I have had *no* visitors! Not even"—(blushing a little)—"the usual one."

"No?" say I, bending down my head over Vick, and allowing her to have a better and more thorough lick at the bridge of my nose than she has ever enjoyed in her life before.

"*You* did not meet him, I suppose?" she says, interrogatively.

"*I!*" cry I, starting guiltily, and stammering. "Not I! Why—why should I?"

"Why should not you, rather?" she

says, laughing a little. "It is not such a *very* unusual occurrence!"

"Do you think not?" I say, in a voice whose trembling is painfully perceptible to myself. "You do not think I—I—" ("You do not think I meet him on purpose," I am going to say; but I break off suddenly, aware that I am betraying myself).

"He will come earlier to-morrow to make up for it"—she says, in a low voice, more to herself than to me—"yes"—(clasping her hands lightly in her lap, while the firelight plays upon the lovely mildness of her happy face, and repeating the words softly)—"yes, he will come earlier to-morrow!"

I *cannot* bear it. I rise up abruptly, trundling poor Vick, to whom this reverse is quite unexpected, down on the carpet, and rushing out of the room.

* * * *

It is evening now—late evening, draw-

ing towards bed-time. I am sitting with my back to the light, and have asked for a shade for the lamp, on the plea that the wind has cut my eyes—but, in spite of my precautions, I am well aware that the disfigurement of my face is still unmistakably evident to the most casual eye; and, from the anxious care with which Barbara looks *away from* me, when she addresses me, I can perceive that she has observed it, as, indeed, how could she fail to do? If Tou Tou were here, she would overwhelm me with officious questions—would stare me crazy, but Barbara averts her eyes, and asks nothing.

We have been sitting in perfect silence for a long while; no noise but the click of Barbara's knitting pins, the low flutter of the fire-flame, and the sort of suppressed choked *inward* bark, with which Vick attacks a phantom Tom cat in her dreams.

Suddenly I speak.

"Barbara!" say I, with a hard, forced laugh, "I am going to ask you a silly question; tell me, did you ever observe—has it ever struck you that there was something rather—rather *offensive* in my manner to men?"

Her knitting drops into her lap. Her blue eyes open wide, like dog violets in the sun; she is *obliged* to look at me now.

"*Offensive!*" she echoes, with an accent of the most utter surprise and mystification. "Good heavens, no! What has come to the child? Oh!"—(with a little look of dawning intelligence)—"I see! You mean, do not you snub them too much? Are not you sometimes a little too *hard* upon them?"

"No," say I, gravely; "I did not mean that."

She looks at me for explanation, but I can give none. More silence.

Vick is either in hot pursuit of, or hot

flight from, the Tom cat; all her four legs are quivering and kicking in a mimic gallop.

"Do you remember," say I, again speaking, and again prefacing my words by an uneasy laugh, "how the boys at home used always to laugh at me, because I never knew how to flirt, nor had any pretty ways? Do you think"—(speaking slowly and hesitatingly)—"that boys—one's brothers, I mean—would be good judges of that sort of thing?"

"As good as any one else's brothers, I suppose," she says, with a low laugh, but still looking puzzled; "but why do you ask?"

"I do not know," reply I, trying to speak carelessly; "it came into my head."

"Has any one been accusing you?" she says, a little curiously. "But no! who *could?* You have seen no one, not even—"

"No, no!" interrupt I, shrinking from the sound of the name that I know is coming; "of course not; no one!"

The clock strikes eleven, and wakes Vick. Barbara rises, rolls up her knitting, and going over to the fire-place, stands with one white elbow resting on the chimney piece, and slender neck drooped, pensively gazing at the low fire.

"Do you know," she says, with a half-confused smile, that is also tinged with a little anxiety, "I have been thinking—it is the first time for three months that he has not been here at all, either in the morning, the afternoon, or the evening!"

"Is it?" say I, slightly shivering.

"I think," she says, with a rather embarrassed laugh, "that he must have heard *you* were out, and that that was why he did not come. You know I always tell you that he likes you best."

She says it as a joke, and yet her great eyes are looking at me with a sort of wistfulness, but neither to *them* nor to her words can I make any answer.

CHAPTER XIV.

NEXT morning I am sitting before my looking-glass—never to me a pleasant article of furniture—having my hair dressed. I am hardly awake yet, and have not quite finished disentangling the real live disagreeables which I have to face, from the imaginary ones from which my waking has freed me. At least, in real life, I am not perpetually pursued, through dull abysses, by a man in a crape mask, from whom I am madly struggling to escape, and who is perpetually on the point of overtaking and seizing me.

It was a mistake going to sleep at all last

night. It would have been far wiser and better to have kept awake. The *real* evils are bad enough, but the dream ones in their vivid life make me shiver even now, though the morning sun is lying in companionable patches on the floor, and the birds are loudly talking all together. 'Do *no* birds ever listen?'

Distracted for a moment from my own miseries, by the noise of their soft yet sharp hubbub, I am thinking this, when a knock comes at the door, and the next moment Barbara enters. Her blonde hair is tumbled about her shoulders; no white rose's cheeks are paler than hers; in her hand she has a note. In a moment I have dismissed the maid, and we are alone.

"I want you to read this!" she says, in an even and monotonous voice, from which by an effort whose greatness I can dimly guess, she keeps all sound of trembling.

I have risen and turned from the glass;

but now my knees shake under me so much that I have to sit down again. She comes behind me, so that I may no longer see her: and putting her arms round my neck, and hiding her face in my unfinished hair, says, whisperingly,

"Do not fret about it, Nancy!—I do not mind much."

Then she breaks into quiet tears.

"Do you mean to say that he has had the *insolence* to write to you," I cry, in a passion of indignation, forgetting for the moment Barbara's ignorance of what has occurred, and only reminded of it by the look of wonder that, as I turn on my chair to face her, I see come into her eyes.

"Have not you been expecting him every day to write to me?" she asks, with a little wonder in her tone; "but *read!*" (pointing to the note, and laughing with a touch of bitterness), "you will soon see that there is no *insolence* here."

I had quite as lief, in my present state of mind, touch a yard-long wriggling ground-worm, or a fat wood-louse, as paper that his fingers have pressed; but I overcome my repulsion, and unfold the note:—

"DEAR MISS GREY,—

"Can I do anything for you in town? I am going up there to-morrow, and shall thence, I think, run over to the Exhibition. I have no doubt that it is just like all the others; but *not* to have seen it will set one at a disadvantage with one's fellows. I am afraid that there is no chance of your being still at Tempest when I return. I shall be most happy to undertake any commissions.

"Yours sincerely,

"F. MUSGRAVE."

The note drops from my fingers, rolls on to my lap, and thence to the ground. I sit

in stiff and stupid silence. To tell the truth, I am trying strongly to imagine how I should look and what I should say, were I as ignorant of causes as Barbara thinks me, and to look and speak accordingly.

She kneels down beside me, and softly drawing down my face, till it is on a level with hers, and our cheeks touch, says in a tone of gentle entreaty and compassion, as if *I* were the one to be considered—the prime sufferer :

" Do not fret about it, Nancy ! it is of no — no consequence ! — there is no harm done !"

I struggle to say *something*, but for the life of me I can frame no words.

" It was my own fancy !" she says, faltering, " I suppose my vanity misled me !"

" It is all my fault !" cry I, suddenly finding passionate words, starting up, and beginning to walk feverishly to and fro—" *all !* —there never was any one in all this world

so blind, so ill-judging, so miserably mistaken! If it had not been for me, you never would have thought twice of him—never; and I"—(beginning to speak with weeping indistinctness)—"I thought it would be so nice to have you near me—I thought that there was nothing the matter with him, but his temper; *many* men are ill-tempered—nearly *all*. If" (tightly clenching my hands, and setting my teeth) "I had had any idea of his being the *scoundrel* that he is——"

"But he is not," she interrupts quickly, wincing a little at my words; "indeed he is not! What ill have we heard from him? If you do not mind" (laying her hand with gentle entreaty on my arm), "I had rather, *far* rather, that you did not say anything hard of him! I was always so glad that you and he were such friends—always—and I do not know why—there is no sense in it; but I am glad of it still."

"We were *not* friends," say I, writhing a little; "why do you say so?"

She looks at me with a great and unfeigned astonishment.

"*Not friends!*" she echoes, slowly repeating my words; then, seeing the expression of my face, stops suddenly.

"Are you *sure*," cry I, feverishly snatching her hands, and looking with searching anxiety into her face, "that you spoke truth just now?—that you do not mind much?—that you will get over it!—that it will not *kill* you?"

"*Kill* me!" she says, with a little sorrowful smile of derision; "no, no! I am not so easily killed."

"Are you *sure!*" persist I, with a passionate eagerness, still reading her tear-stained face, "that it will not take the taste out of everything?—that it will not make you hate all your life?—it would me."

"*Quite* sure!—certain!" she says, looking back at me with a steady meekness, though her blue eyes brim over; "because God has taken from me *one* thing—one that I never had any right to expect—should I do well, do you think, to quarrel with all that He has left me?"

I cannot answer: her godly patience is too high a thing for me.

"Even if my life *were* spoilt," she goes on, after a moment or two, her voice gaining firmness, and her face a pale serenity, "even if it were—but it is *not*—indeed it is not. In a very little while it will seem to me as good and pleasant and full as ever; but even if it *were*" (looking at me with a lovely confidence in her eyes), "it would be no such very great matter—*this* life is not everything!"

"Is not it?" say I, with a doubting shiver. "Who can tell you that? who knows?"

"*No one* has been to blame," she continues, with a gentle persistence. "I should like you to see that! There has been only a—a—*mistake*" (her voice failing a little again)—"a mistake that has been corrected in time, and for which no one—*no one*, Nancy, is the worse!"

CHAPTER XV.

SO this is the way in which Barbara's hope dies! Our hopes have as many ways of dying as our bodies. Sometimes they pine and fall into a slow consumption, we nursing, cockering, and physicking them to the last. Sometimes they fall down dead suddenly, as one that in full health, with his bones full of marrow, and his eyes full of light, drops wordless into the next world unaware. This last has been Barbara's case. When she thought it healthiest and most vigorous in its stalwart life, then the death-mark was on it. To most of us, O

friends, troubles are as great stones cast unexpectedly on a smooth road; over which, in a dark night, we trip, and grumblingly stumble, cursing, and angrily bruising our limbs. To a few of us, they are ladders, by which we climb to God; hills, that lift us nearer Heaven—that Heaven, which, however certainly—with whatever mathematical precision—it has been demonstrated to us that it exists not here, nor there, nor yet anywhere, we still dimly, with yearning tears and high longings, grasp at. Barbara has always looked Heavenward. In all her mirth, God has mixed. Now, therefore, in this grief that He has sent her—this ignoble grief, that yet cuts none the less deeply for being ignoble, and excluding the solace of human sympathy, she but thrusts her hand with a fuller confidence in His, and fixes her sweet eyes with a more reverent surety on the one prime Consoler of humankind, who,

from His Cross, has looked royally down the toiling centuries—the King, whom this generation, above all generations, is labouring—and, as not a few think, *successfully*—to discrown. To her, His Kingship is as unquestioned as when heretics and Paynims burnt to prove it.

Often, since then, in those vain longings that come to each of us, I suppose, I tried in after days—sometimes I try now, to stretch my arms out wide backwards towards the past—to speak the words that would have been as easily spoken then as any other—that no earthly power can ever make spoken words now, of sympathy and appreciation to Barbara.

I did say loving things, but they seem to me now to have been but scant and shabby. Why did not I say a great many more? Oh, all of you who live with those that are dearer to you than they seem, tell them every day how much you love them! at

the risk of *wearying* them, tell them, I pray you: it will save you, perhaps, many after pangs.

I think that, at this time, there are in me *two* Nancys—Barbara's Nancy, and Roger's Nancy; the one so vexed, thwarted, and humiliated in spirit that she feels as if she never could laugh quite heartily again; the other so utterly and triumphantly glad that any future tears or trials seem to her in the highest degree improbable. And Barbara herself is on the side of this latter. From her hopeful speech and her smiles, you would think that some good news had come to her—that she was on the eve of some long-looked-for yet hardly-hoped prosperity. Not that she is unnaturally or hysterically lively—an error into which many, making such an effort and struggle for self-conquest, would fall. Barbara's mirth was never noisy, as mine and the boys' so often

was. Perhaps—nay, I have often thought since, *certainly*—she weeps as she prays, in secret; but God is the only One who knows of her tears, as of her prayers. She has always been one to go halves in her pleasures, but of her sorrows she will give never a morsel to any one.

Her very quietness under her trouble—her silence under it—her equanimity—mislead me. It is the impulse of any hurt thing to cry out. I, myself, have always done it. Half unconsciously, I am led by this reasoning to think that Barbara's wound cannot be very deep, else would she shrink and writhe beneath it. So I talk to her all day, with merciless length, about Roger. I go through all the old queries. I again critically examine my face, and arrive—not only at the former conclusion, that one side is worse-looking than the other, but, also, that it looks ten years older.

I have my flax hair built in many strange and differing fashions, and again *un*built: piled high, to give me height; twisted low, in a vain endeavour to liken me to the Greeks; curled, plaited, frizzed, and again unfrizzed. I institute a searching and critical examination of my wardrobe, rejecting this and that; holding one colour against my cheek, to see whether my pallor will be able to bear it; turning away from another with a grimace of self-disgust.

And this is the same "*I*," who thought it so little worth while to win the good opinion of father's blear-eyed old friend, that I went to my first meeting with him with a scorched face, loose hair, tottering, all through prayers, on the verge of a descent about my neck, and a large round hole, smelling horribly of singeing, burnt in the very front of my old woollen frock.

His coming is near now. This *very* day

I shall see him come in at that door. He will sit in that chair. His head will dent that cushion. I shall sit on a foot-stool at his feet. The better to imagine the position, I push a foot-stool into the desired neighbourhood to Roger's arm-chair, and already see myself, with the eye of faith, in solid reality occupying it. I rehearse all the topics that will engage my tongue. The better to realize their effect upon him, I give utterance out loud to the many greetings, to the numberless fond and pretty things with which I mean to load him.

He always looked so very joyful when I said any little civil thing to him, and I so seldom, *seldom* did. Ah! we will change all that! He shall be nauseated with sweets. And then, still sitting by him, holding his hand, and with my head (dressed in what I finally decide upon as the becomingest fashion) daintily rested on

his arm, I will tell him all my troubles. I will tell him of Algy's estrangement, his cold looks and harsh words. Without any outspoken or bitter abuse of her, I will yet manage cunningly to set him on his guard against Mrs. Huntley. I will lament over Bobby to him. Yes, I will tell him *all* my troubles—*all*, that is, with one reservation.

Barbara is no longer here. She has gone home.

"You will be better by yourselves," she says gently, when she announces her intention of going. "He will like it better. I should if I were he. It will be like a new honeymoon."

"*That* it will not," reply I stoutly, recollecting how much I yawned, and how largely Mr. Musgrave figured in the first. "I have no opinion of honeymoons, no more would *you* if you had *had* one."

"*Should* not I?" speaking a little absently, while her eyes stray through the

window to the serene coldness of the sky, and the pallid droop of the snowdrops in the garden border.

"You are sure," say I, earnestly, taking her light hand in mine, "that you are not going because you think that you are not *wanted* now—that now that I have my—my own property again" (smiling irrepressibly), "I can do very well without you."

"*Quite* sure, Nancy!" looking back into my eager eyes with confident affection.

"And you will come back *very* soon? *very?*"

"When you quarrel," she answers, her face dimpling into a laugh, "I will come and make it up between you."

"You must come before *then*," say I, with a proud smile, "or your visit is likely to be indefinitely postponed."

Roger and I quarrel! We both find the idea so amusing that we laugh in concert.

CHAPTER XVI.

"*Gertrude.* Is my knight come? O the Lord my band! Sister, do my cheeks look well? Give me a little box o' the ear, that I may seem to blush."

EASTWARD HO!

SHE is gone now. The atmosphere of the house seems less clear, less pure, now that she has left it. As she drives away, it seems to me, looking after her, that no flower ever had a modester face, a more delicate bloom. If I had time to think about it, I should fret sorely after her, I should grievously miss her; but I have none.

The carriage that takes her to the sta-

tion is to wait half-an-hour, and then bring back Roger. There is, therefore, not more than enough time for me to make the careful and lengthy toilette, on which I have expended so much painstaking thought. I have deferred making it till now, so that I may appear in perfect dainty freshness, as if I had just emerged from the manifold silver papers of a band-box, before him when he arrives—that not a hair of my flax head may be displaced from its silky sweep; that there may be no risk of Vick jumping up, and defiling me with muddy paws that know no respect of clothes.

I take a long time over it. I snub my maid more than I ever did in my life before. But I am complete now; to the last pin I am finished. Perhaps—though this does not strike me till the last moment—perhaps I am rather, nay, more than *rather* over-dressed for the occasion. But

surely this, in a person who has not long been in command of fine clothes, and even in that short time has had very few opportunities of airing them, is pardonable.

You remember that it is February. Well, then, this is the warm splendour in which I am clad. Genoa velvet, of the colour of a dark sapphire, trimmed with silver fox fur; and my head crowned with a mob-cap, concerning which I am in doubt, and should be nervously glad to have the boys here to enlighten me as to whether it is very becoming or rather ridiculous. The object of the mob-cap is to approximate my age to Roger's, and to assure all such as the velvet and fur leave in doubt, that I am entitled to take my stand among the portly ranks of British matrons.

"Algy was right," say I, soliloquizing aloud, as I stand before the long cheval glass, with a back hair glass in one hand,

by whose aid I correct any errors in the profile, three-quarters or back view; "mine is not the most hopeless kind of ugliness. It is certainly modifiable by dress."

So saying, I lay down the hand-glass, and walk sedately downstairs, holding my head stiffly erect, and looking over my shoulder, like a child, at the effect of my blue train sweeping down the steps after me.

Arrived in my boudoir, I go and stand by the window, though there are yet ten minutes before he is due. Once I open the casement to listen, but hastily close it again, afraid lest the wintry wind should ruffle the satin smoothness of my hair, or push the mob-cap awry. Then I sit carefully down, and harshly repulsing an overture on the part of Vick to jump into my lap, fix my eyes upon the dark bare boughs of the tall and distant elms, from between which I shall see him steal into sight.

The time ticks slowly on. He is due now. Five more lame, crawling minutes—ten!—no sign of him. Again I rise, unclose the casement, and push my matronly head a little way out to listen. Yes! yes! there is the distant but not doubtful sound of a horse's four hoofs smartly trotting and splashing along the muddy road. Three minutes more, and the sun catches and brightly gleams on one of the quickly turning wheels of the dog-cart as it rolls towards me, between the wintry trees.

At first I cannot see the occupants; the boughs and twigs interpose to hide them; but presently the dog-cart emerges into the open. There is only one person in it!

At first I decline to believe my own eyes. I rub them. I stretch my head further out. Alas! self-deception is no longer possible: the groom returns as he went—alone. Roger has *not* come!

The dog-cart turns towards the stables,

and I run to the bell and pull it violently. I can hardly wait till it is answered. At last, after an interval, which seems to me like twenty minutes, but which that false, cold-blooded clock proclaims to be *two*, the footman enters.

"Sir Roger has not come," I say more affirmatively than interrogatively, for I have no doubt on the subject. "Why did not the groom wait for the next train?"

"If you please, my lady, Sir Roger *has* come."

"*Has come!*" repeat I, in astonishment, opening my eyes; "then where is he?"

"He is walking up, my lady."

"What! all the way from Bishopsthorpe?" cry I, incredulously, thinking of the five miry miles that intervene between us and that station. "*Impossible!*"

"No, my lady, not all the way; only from Mrs. Huntley's."

I feel the colour rushing away from

my cheeks, and turn quickly aside, that my change of countenance may not be perceived.

"Did he get out there?" I ask, faintly.

"Mrs. Huntley was at the gate, my lady, and Sir Roger got down to speak to her, and bid James drive on and tell your ladyship he would be here directly."

"Very well," say I, unsteadily, still averting my face, "that will do."

He is gone, and I need no longer mind what colour my face is, nor what shape of woful jealousy my late so complacent features assume.

So *this* is what comes of thinking life such a grand and pleasant thing, and this world such a lovely satisfying Paradise! Wait long enough—(I have not had to wait very long for my part)—and every sweet thing turns to gall-like bitterness between one's teeth! The experience of a few days ago might have taught me *that*,

one would think, but I was dull to thick-headedness. I required *two* lessons—the second, oh how far harsher than even the first!

In a moment I have taken my resolution. I am racing upstairs. I have reached my room. I do not summon my maid. One requires no assistance to enable one to *un*build, deface, destroy. In a *second*—in much less time than it takes me to write it—I have torn off the mob-cap, and thrown it on the floor. If I had done what I wished, if I had yielded to my first impulse, I should also have trampled upon it, but from this extremity of petulance, I am proud to be able to tell you that I refrain. With rapid fingers I unbutton my blue velvet gown, and step out of it, leaving it in a costly heap on the floor. Then I open the high folding-doors of the wardrobe, and run my eye over its contents; but the most becoming is no longer what I

seek. For a moment or two I stand undecided, then my eye is caught by a venerable garment, lothly and ill made, which I had before I married, and have since kept, more as a relic than anything else—a gown of that peculiar shade of sallow, bilious, Bismarck brown, which is the most trying to the paleness of my skin. Before any one could say "Jack Robinson," it is down, and I am in it. Then, without even a parting smooth to the hair, which the violent off-tearing of my cap must have roughened and dishevelled, I go downstairs and re-enter the boudoir. As I do so, I catch an accidental glimpse of myself in a glass. Good heavens! Can three minutes (for I really have not been longer about it) have wrought such a monstrous metamorphosis? Is everyone as utterly dependent for their charms upon their *husk* as I am? Can this sad, sallow slip of a girl be the beaming, shapely, British

matron I contemplated with so innocently pleased an eye half-an-hour ago? If, in all my designs, I could have the perfect success which has crowned my efforts at self-disfigurement, I should be amongst the most prosperous of my species.

I sit down as far from the window as the dimensions of the room will allow, call Vick, who comes at first sneakingly and doubtful of her reception, up on my lap, and take a book. It is the one nearest to my hand, and I plunge into it haphazard in the middle.

This is the sentence that first greets me:—"Her whole heart was in her boy. She often feared that she loved him too much—more than God himself—yet she could not bear to pray to have her love for her child lessened."

Not a very difficult one to construe, is it? and yet having come to the end, and found that it has conveyed no glimmering

of an idea to my mind, I begin it over again.

"Her whole heart was in her boy. She often feared that she loved him too much—more than God himself—yet she could not bear to pray to have her love for her child lessened."

Still no better! What *is* it all about?

I begin over again.

"Her whole heart was in her boy," etc. I go through this process ten times. I should go through it twenty, or even thirty, for I am resolved to go on reading, but at the end of the tenth, my ear—unconsciously strained—catches the sound of a step at the stair-foot. It is not the footman's. It is firmer, heavier, and yet quicker.

Eight weary months is it since I last heard that footfall. My heart pulses with mad haste, my cheeks throb, but I sit still, and hold the book before my eyes. I will *not* go to meet him. I will be as indifferent

as he! When he opens the door, I will not even look round, I will be too much immersed in the page before me.

"Her whole heart was in her boy. She often feared that—"

The door handle is turning. I *can not* help it! Against my will, my head turns too. With no volition of my own—against my firmest intention—my feet carry me hastily towards him. My arms stretch themselves out. Thank God! thank God! whatever happens afterwards, I shall still thank God, and call Him good for allowing it. I am in Roger's embrace. No more mistakes! no more delays! he is here, and I am kissing him as I never kissed any one —as I certainly never kissed *him* in my life before.

Well, I suppose that in every life there are *some* moments that are *absolutely* good —that one could not mend even if one were given the power to try! I suppose that

even those, who, looking back over their history, say most distinctly and certainly, "It was a failure," can yet lay the finger of memory on *some* such gold minutes—it may be only half-a-dozen, only four, only *two*—but still on some.

This is one of my gold moments, one of those misplaced ones that have strayed out of heaven, where perhaps they are *all* such —*perhaps*—one can't be *sure*, for what human imagination can grasp the idea of even a *day*, wholly made of such minutes?

I have forgotten Mrs. Huntley—Mr. Musgrave. Every ill suspicion, every stinging remembrance, is dead or fallen into a trance. All bad thoughts have melted away from the earth. Only joyful love and absolute faith remain, only the knowledge that Roger is mine, and I am his, and that we are in each other's arms. I do not know how long we remain without speaking. I do not imagine that souls

in bliss ever think of looking at the clock. He is the first to break silence. For the first time for eight months I hear his voice again—the voice that for so many weeks seemed to me no better than any other voice—whose tones I *now* feel I could pick out from those of any other living thing, did all creation shout together.

"Let me look at my wife!" he says, taking my countenance in his tender hands, as if it was made of old china, and would break if he let it fall. "I feel as if I had never *had* a wife before, as if it were quite a new plaything."

I make no verbal answer. I am staring up with all my eyes into his face, thinking, with a sort of wonder, how much goodlier, younger, statelier it is than it has appeared to me in any of those dream pictures, which yet mostly flatter.

"My wife! my wife!" he says, speaking the words most softly, as if they greatly

pleased him, and replacing with carefullest fingers a stray and errant lock that has wandered from its fellows into my left eye. "What has come to you? Had I forgotten what you were like? How pretty you are! How well you look!"

"Do I?" say I, with a pleased simper; then, with a sudden and overwhelming recollection of the bilious gingery frock, and the towzled hair, "No, nonsense!" I say, uneasily, "impossible! You are laughing at me! Ah!"—(with a sigh of irrepressible regret and back-handed pride) — "you should have seen me half-an-hour ago! I *did* look nice *then*, if you like."

"Why nicer than now?"—(with a puzzled smile that both plays about his bearded lips, and gaily shines in his steel gray eyes).

"Oh, never mind! never mind!" reply I, in some confusion, "it is a long story; it is of no consequence, but I *did*."

He does not press for an explanation, for which I am obliged to him.

"Nancy!" he says, with a sort of hesitating joy, a diffident triumph in his voice, "do you know, I believe you have kept your promise! I believe, I *really* believe, that you are a little glad to see me!"

"Are *you* glad to see *me*, is more to the purpose?" return I, descending out of heaven with a pout, and returning to the small jealousies and acerbities of earth, and to the recollection of that yet unexplained alighting at Armida's gate.

"*Am I?*"

He seems to think that no asseverations, no strong adjectives or intensifying adverbs, no calling upon sun and moon and stars to bear witness to his gladness, can increase the force of those two tiny words, so he adds none.

"I wonder then," say I, in a rather sneaky and shamefaced manner, mumbling

and looking down, "that you were not in a greater hurry to get to me?"

"*In a greater hurry!*" he repeats, in an accent of acute surprise. "Why, child, what are you talking about? Since we landed, I have neither slept nor eaten. I drove straight across London, and have been in the train ever since."

"But—between—this—and the—station?" suggest I, slowly, having taken hold of one of the buttons of his coat; the very one that in former difficulties I used always to resort to.

"You mean about my walking up?" he says readily, and without the slightest trace of guilty consciousness, indeed with a distinct and open look of pleasure; "but, my darling, how could I tell how long she would keep me? poor little woman!" (beginning to laugh and to put back the hair from his tanned forehead). "I am afraid I did not bless her when I saw her standing

at her gate! I had half a mind to ask her whether another time would not do as well, but she looked so eager to hear about her husband—you know I have been seeing him at St. Thomas—such a wistful little face—and I knew that she could not keep me more than ten minutes; and altogether when I thought of her loneliness and my own luck ——"

He breaks off.

"Are you so sure she *is* lonely?" I say, with an innocent air of asking for information, and still working hard at the button; "are people always lonely when their husbands are away?"

He looks at me strangely for a moment; then, "Of course she is lonely, poor little thing!" he says, warmly; "how could she help it?"

A slight pause.

"*Most* men," say I, jealously, "would not have thought it a hardship to walk up

and down between the laurustinus with Mrs. Zéphine, I can tell you!"

"Would not they?" he answers indifferently. "I daresay not! she always *was* a good little thing!"

"Excellent!" reply I, with a nasty dryness, "bland, passionate, and deeply religious!"

Again he looks at me in surprise—a surprise which, after a moment's reflection, melts and brightens into an expression of pleasure.

"Did you care so much about my coming that ten minutes seemed to make a difference?" he asks, in an eager voice. "Is it possible that you were *in a hurry* for me?"

Why cannot I speak truth, and say yes? Why does an objectlessly lying devil make its inopportune entry into me? Through some misplaced and crooked false shame I answer, "Not at all! not at all! of course

a few minutes one way or the other could not make much difference; I was only puzzled to know what had become of you?"

He looks a shade disappointed, and for a moment we are both silent. We have sat down side by side on the sofa. Vick is standing on her hinder legs, with her fore-paws rested on Roger's knee. Her tail is wagging with the strong and untiring regularity of a pendulum, and a smirk of welcome and recognition is on her face. Roger's arm is round me, and we are holding each other's hands, but we are no longer in heaven. I could not tell you *why*, but we are not. Some stupid constraint—quite of earth—has fallen upon me. Where are all those most tender words, those profuse endearments with which I meant to have greeted him?

"And so it is actually true!" he says, with a long-drawn sigh of relief; his eyes wandering round the room, and taking in all the fa-

miliar objects; "there is no mistake about it! I am actually holding your real live hand" (turning it gently about and softly considering the long slight fingers and pink palm) —"in mine! Ah! my dear, how often, how often I have held it so in my dreams! Have you ever" (speaking with a sort of doubtfulness and uncertain hope)—"have you ever—no, I daresay not—so held mine?"

The diffident passion in his voice for once destroys that vile constraint, dissipates that idiotic sense of bashfulness.

"*Scores* of times!" I answer, letting my head drop on his shoulder, and not taking the trouble to raise it again.

"I never *used* to think myself of a very nervous turn!" he says, presently, with a smile. "Nancy, you will laugh at me, but I assure you upon my honour that all the way home I have been in the most abject and deadly fright: at every puff of wind

I thought we were infallibly going to the bottom: whenever the carriage rocked in the least to-day on the way down, I made up my mind we were going to smash! Little woman, what can a bit of a thing like you have done to me to make me seem so much more valuable to myself than I have ever done these eight-and-forty years?"

I think no answer to this so suitable and seemly as a dumb friction of my left cheek against the rough cloth of the shoulder on which it has reposed itself.

"Talk to me, Nancy!" he says, in a quiet half whisper of happiness. "Let me hear the sound of your voice! I am sick of my own; I have had a glut of that all these weary eight months; tell me about them all! How are they all? how are the boys?" (with a playful smile of recollection at what used to be my *one* subject, the one theme on which I was wont to wax illimitably diffuse). But now, at the magic

name no pleasant garrulity overcomes me; only the remembrance of my worries; of all those troubles that I mean now to transfer from my own to Roger's broad shoulders swoop down upon me.

I raise my head and speak with a clouded brow and a complaining tone.

"The Brat has gone back to Oxford," I say, gloomily; "Bobby has gone to Hong Kong, and Algy has gone to *the dogs*,—or at least is going there as hard as he can!"

"*To the dogs?*" (with an accent of surprise and concern); "what do you mean? what has sent him there?"

"You had better ask Mrs. Zéphine," reply I, bitterly, thinking, with a lively exasperation of the changed and demoralized Algy I had last seen—soured, head-strong and unhinged.

"*Zéphine!*" (repeating the name with an accent of thorough astonishment) "what on earth can *she* have to say to it?"

"Ah *what?*" reply I, with oracular spite; then overcome with remorse at the thought of the way in which I am embittering the first moments of his return, I re-bury my face in his shoulder.

"I will tell you about that to-morrow," I say, "to-day is a good day, and we will talk only of good things and of good people."

He does not immediately answer. My remark seems to have buried him in thought. Presently he shakes off his distraction and speaks again.

"And Barbara? how is she? *She* has not" (beginning to laugh) "*she* has not gone to the dogs, I suppose!"

"No," say I, slowly, not thinking of what I am saying, but with my thoughts wandering off to the greatest and sorest of my afflictions, "not yet."

"And" (smiling) "your plan. See what a good memory I have—your plan of

marrying her to Musgrave, how does that work?"

"*My* plan!" cry I, tremulously, while a sudden torrent of scarlet pours all over my face and neck. "I do not know what you are talking about! I never had any such plan! Phew!" (lifting up the arm that is round my waist, hastily removing it, rising and going to the window,) "how hot this room grows of an afternoon!"

CHAPTER XVII.

SO the king enjoys his own again, and Roger is at home. Not yet—and now it is the next morning—has his return become *real* to me. Still there is something phantom and visionary about it: still it seems to me open to question, whether, if I look away from him for a moment, he may not melt and disappear into dreamland.

All through breakfast I am dodging and peeping from behind the urn to assure myself of the continued presence and substantial reality of the strong shoulders, and bronze-coloured face that so solidly and

certainly face me. As often as I catch his eye—and this is not seldom, for, perhaps, he too, has his misgivings about me—I smile, in a manner, half ashamed, half sneaky, and yet most wholly satisfied.

The sun, who is not by any means *always* so well-judging, often hiding his face with both hands from a wedding, and hotly and gaudily flaming down on a black funeral, is shining with a temperate February comeliness in at our windows, on our garden borders; trying (and failing) to warm up the passionless melancholy of the chilly snowdrop families, trying (and succeeding) to add his quota to the joy that already fills and occupies our two hearts.

"How fine it is!" I cry, flying with unmatronly agility to the window, and playing a waltz on the pane. "That is right! I should have been so angry if it had rained; let us come out at once —I want to hear your opinion about

the laurels; they want cutting badly, but I could not have them touched while you were away, though Bobby's fingers—when he was here—itched to be hacking at them. Come, I have got on my strong boots on purpose!—*at once.*"

"*At once?*" he repeats, a little doubtfully turning over the letters that lie in a heap beside his plate. "Well, I do not know about *that*—duty first and pleasure afterwards. Had not I better go to Zéphine Huntley's *first*, and get it over?"

"To *Zéphine Huntley's?*" repeat I, my fingers suddenly breaking off in the middle of their tune, as I turn quickly round to face him; the smile disappearing from my face, and my jaw lengthening; "you do not mean to say that you are going there *again?*"

"Yes, *again!*" he answers, laughing a little, and slightly mimicking my tragic tone; "why not, Nancy?"

I make no answer. I turn away and look out; but I see a different landscape. It looks to me as if I were regarding it through dark blue glass.

"I have got a whole sheaf of letters and papers from her husband for her," pursues Roger, apparently calmly and utterly unaware of my discomfiture, "and I do not want to keep her out of them longer than I can help."

Still I make no rejoinder. My fingers stray idly up and down the glass; but it is no longer a giddy waltz that they are executing—if it is a tune at all, it is some little ugly dirge.

"What has happened to you, Nancy?" says Roger, presently, becoming aware of my silence, rising and following me; "what are you doing—catching flies?"

"No," reply I, with an acrid smartness, "not I! I leave that to Mrs. Zéphine."

Once again he regards me with that look

of unfeigned surprise, tinged with a little pain, which yesterday I detected on his face. When I look at him, when my eyes rest on the brave and open honesty of his, my ugly nipping doubts disappear.

"Do not go," say I, standing on tiptoe, so that my hands may reach his neck, and clasp it, speaking in my most beguiling half whisper; "why should you fetch and carry for her? let John or William take her letters. Are you so sure" (with an irresistible sneer) "that she is in such a hurry for them?—stay with me this *one first* day!—*do, please—Roger.*"

It is the first time in all my history that I have succeeded in delivering myself of his Christian name to his face—frequently as I have fired it off in dialogues with myself, behind his back. It shoots out now with the loud suddenness of a mismanaged soda-water cork.

"*Roger!*" he repeats, in an accent of

keen pleasure, catching me to his heart; "what! I am *Roger*, after all, am I? The 'General' has gone to glory at last, has he? —thank God!"

"I will ring and tell John at once," say I, with subtle amiability, disengaging myself from his arms, and walking quickly towards the bell.

"Stay!" he says, putting his hand on me in detention, before I have made two steps; "you must not! it is no use! John will not do, or William either: it is a matter of business. I have" (sighing) "to go through many of these papers with her."

"*You?*"

"Yes, *I*; why is that so surprising?"

"What possible concern is it of *yours?*" ask I, throwing the reins on the neck of my indignation, and urging that willing steed to a sharp gallop, crimsoning as I speak, and raising my voice, as has ever been our immemorial wont in home broils. "For

my part, I never saw any good come of people putting their fingers into their neighbours' pies!"

"Not even if those neighbours are the oldest friends they have in the world?" he says, gently, yet eyeing with some wonder —perhaps apprehension, for odd things frighten men—the small scarlet scold who stands swelling with ruffled feathers, and angry eyes, winking to keep the tears out of them, before him.

"I thought *father* was the oldest friend you had in the world!" say I, with a jealous tartness; "you always *used* to tell us so."

"*Some* of my oldest friends then," he answers, looking a little amused, "since you will have me so exact."

"If Mrs. Huntley is the oldest friend you have in the world," say I, acrimoniously, still sticking to his first and most offensive form of expression, and *heavily*

accenting it, "I wonder that you never happened to mention her existence before you went."

"So do I," he says, a little thoughtfully. "I am not much of a friend, am I? but——" (looking at me with that sincere and hearty tenderness which, as long as I am under its immediate influence, always disarms me) "my head was full of other things; and people drop out of one's life so; I had neither seen nor heard of her since—since she married."

("Since she was engaged to you," say I mentally interlining this statement, "and threw you over because you were not rich enough! why cannot you be honest and say so?") but aloud I give utterance to nothing but a shrewish and disbelieving "H'm!"

A pause. I do not know what Roger is thinking of, but I am following out my own train of thought; the fruit of which is

this observation, made with an air of reflection.

"Mr. Huntley is a very rich man, I suppose?"

Roger laughs.

"*Rich!* poor Huntley! that is the very last thing his worst enemy could accuse him of! why he was obliged to run the constable two years ago."

"But I suppose," say I slowly, "that he was better off—*well* off once—when she married him, for instance?"

"How did you know that?" he asks, a little surprised. "Who told you? Yes; at that time he was looked upon as quite a parti."

"Better off than *you*, I suppose?" say I, still speaking slowly, and reading the carpet. "I mean than you were then?"

Again he laughs.

"He might easily have been that? I had nothing but my younger son's portion

and my pay; why Nancy, I had an idea that I had told you that before."

"I dare say you did," reply I, readily, "but I like to hear it again."

Yet another pause.

"He is badly off *now* then," say I, presently, with a faintly triumphant accent.

"About as badly off as it is possible to be," answers Roger, very gravely; "that is my business with his wife; she and I are trying to make an arrangement with his creditors, to enable him to come home."

"To come home!" echo I, raising my eyebrows in an artless astonishment; "but if he *does* come home, what will become of Algy and the *rest of them?*"

"The rest of *whom?*" asks Roger, but there is such a severity in his eye as he puts the question that it is not too much to say I *dare not* explain. The one thing

hated of Roger's soul—the one thing for which he has no tolerance, and on which he brings to bear all the weight of his righteous wrath, is *scandal.* Not even me will he allow to nibble at a neighbour's fame.

"Is she much changed since you saw her last?" pursue I presently, with infantile guilelessness; "was her hair *red* then? some people say it *used* to be black!"

I raise my eyes to his face as I put this gentle query, in order the better to trace its effect; but the concern that I see in his countenance is so very much greater than any that I had intended to have summoned that I have no sooner hurled my dart than I repent me of having done it.

"Nancy!" he says, putting one hand under my chin, and stroking my hair with the other—"am I going to have a *back-biting* wife? Child! child! there was neither hatred nor malice in the little

girl I found sitting at the top of the wall."

I do not answer.

"Nancy," he says again, in a voice of most thorough earnestness, "I have a favour to ask of you—I know when I put it *that way*, that you will not say 'No;' if you do not mind, I had rather you did not abuse Zéphine Huntley!—for the matter of that, I had rather you did not abuse any one—it does not pay, and there is no great fun in it; but Zéphine *specially* not."

"Why *specially?*" cry I, breathing short and speaking again with a quick raised voice. "I know that it is a bad plan abusing people, you need not tell me *that*, I know it as well as you do, and I never did it at home, before I married, *never!*—none of them ever accused me of it—I was always quite good-natured about people, *quite;* but why *she specially?* why

is she to be more sacred than any one else?"

"It is an old story," he answers, passing his hand across his forehead with what looks to me like a rather weary gesture and sighing, "I do not know why I did not tell you before—did not I ever?—no, by-the-by, I remember I never did; well, I will tell you now, and then you will understand!"

"Do not!" cry I passionately, putting my fingers in my ears, and growing scarlet, while the tears rush in mad haste to my eyes, for I imagine that I well know what is coming. "I do not want to hear! I had rather not! I *hate* old stories." He looks at me in silent dismay. "I mean," say I, seeing that some explanation is needed, "that I know all about it!—I have heard it already! I have been told it."

"Been told it? By whom?"

"Never mind by whom!" reply I, removing my fingers from my ears, and covering with both hot hands my hotter face. "I *have* been told it! I *have* heard it, and what is more, I *will not hear it again!*"

END OF VOL. II.

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